5526

SPECIAL OPS

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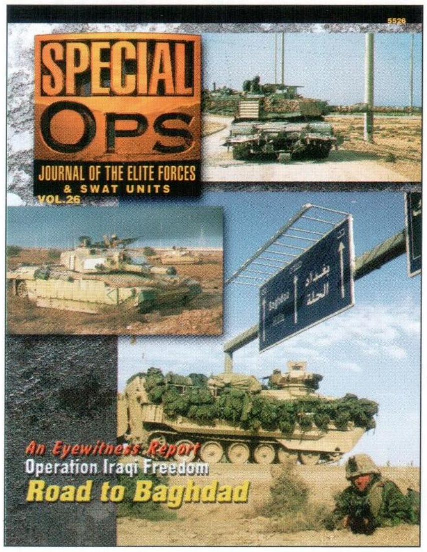
VOL.26

بغداد
الحلة
Baghdad
Hilla

An Eyewitness Report

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Road to Baghdad



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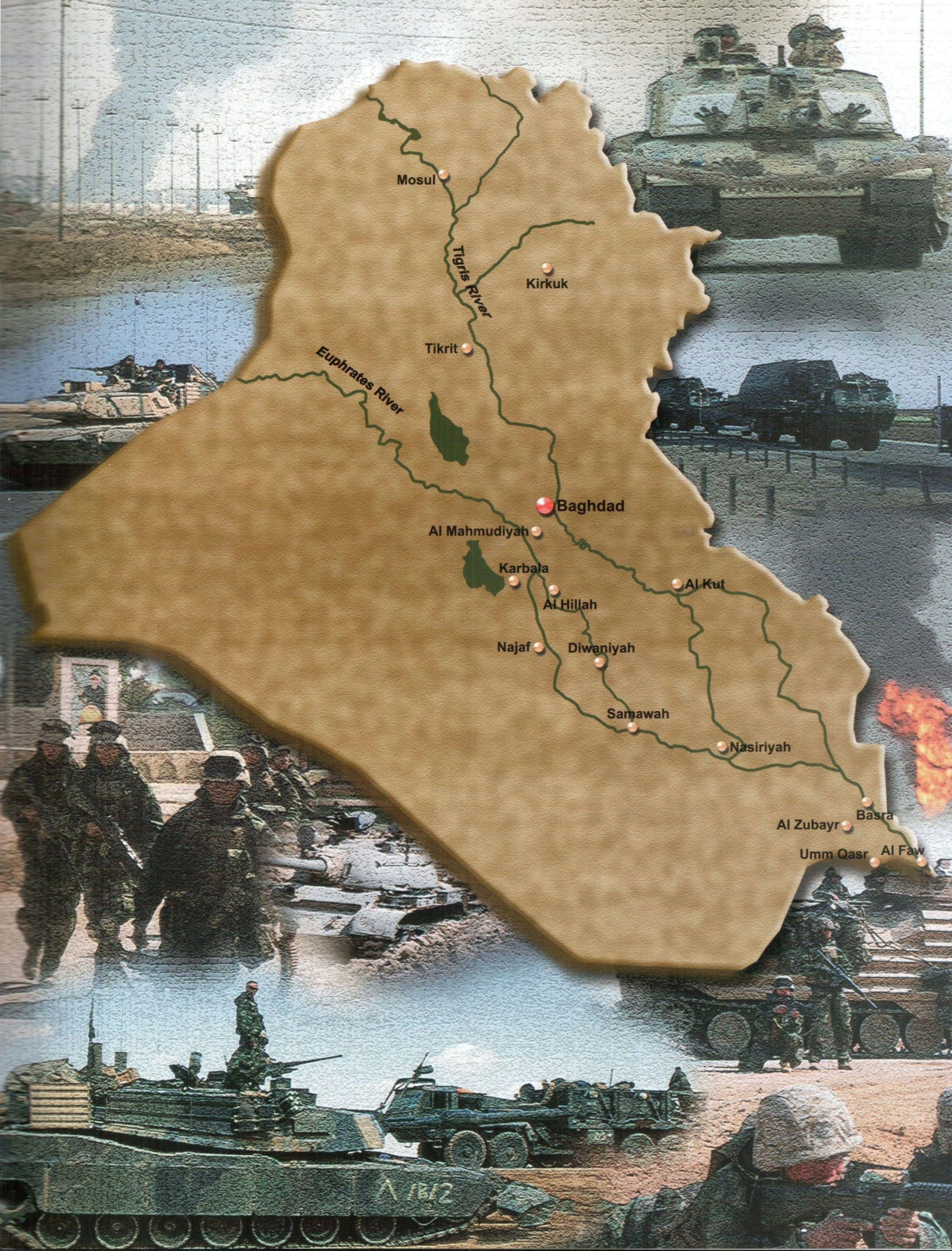
Introduction

In order to bring back these images to you, I suffered cold, hunger, stress, fear, and even shed a little blood as a result of a run-in with the US Military Police, who had a hard time understanding that a war correspondent's place is on the front line. I was also arrested twice by the Iraqi Secret Service.

I wish to thank each soldier, NCO and officer among the front-line troops (USMC, 3rd Infantry Division and British forces), and even the Iraqi Armed Forces Minister. As for the official PIOs (except for Staff Sergeant Jamisson, USMC, and the PIO of the British forces), I have no reasons to thank them.

Yves Debay


Mosul
Tigris River
Kirkuk
Tikrit
Euphrates River
Baghdad
Al Mahmudiyah
Karbala
Al Kut
Al Hillah
Najaf
Diwaniyah
Samawah
Nasiriyah
Basra
Al Zubayr
Umm Qasr
Al Faw
Λ 18/2

Kuwait City: A Well-protected Rear Base

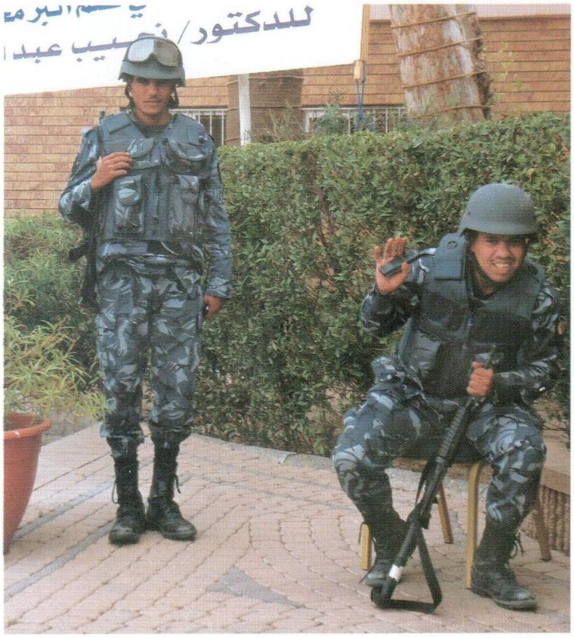
The center of Kuwait City was deserted on the first day of the war. As you can see here, in the downtown area outside the Sheraton hotel (which was the press center in Kuwait), only a police patrol car could be seen patrolling the streets. A few Iraqi Al Hada missiles were launched into the emirate causing some minor damage.

Upon the arrival of the US forces and those of the expanding coalition, the small emirate of Kuwait, which the Iraqi Army invaded in 1990, became the base of departure for the force that would invade Iraq.

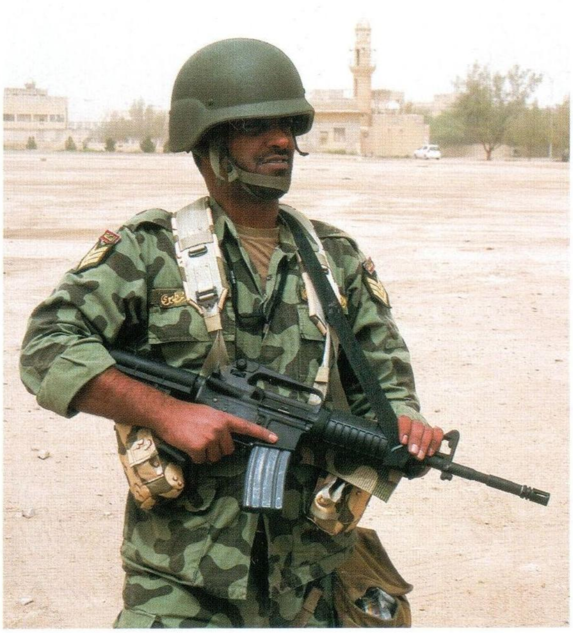
Emir Jaber and his political council, as well as the security forces of the emirate, became concerned about possible terrorist attacks against US or British interests in Kuwait. To foil any attack attempt, the Police Special Forces of the Ministry of the Interior were mobilized to watch over the city center and official buildings during the crisis. Some armored vehicles were also deployed to stand as static guards behind sand bags.

On 19 March, one day before the attack began, the Kuwait National Guard made a demonstration-in-force in the city center. Along with the "men in blue" of the Police Special Forces of the Ministry of the Interior, the National Guard is one of the pillars of the regime. Its missions are intervention by force and providing security. The members of the Guard have tribal links to the Emir's family, and the 8000-strong National Guard is directly under the command of the Crown Prince.

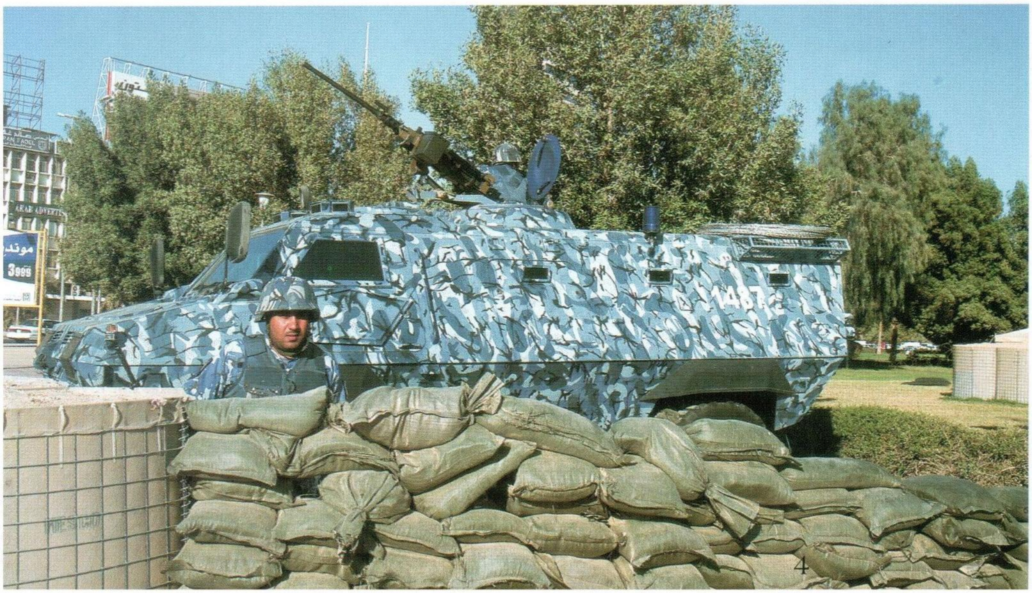
The unit is organized within an armored infantry battalion equipped with Austrian Pandur APCs, a Special Forces unit and an Anti-tank and Reconnaissance Squadron equipped with French VBLs.



Each location where westerners were present was watched by the "men in blue" of the Police Special Force, who were armed with M-4s.

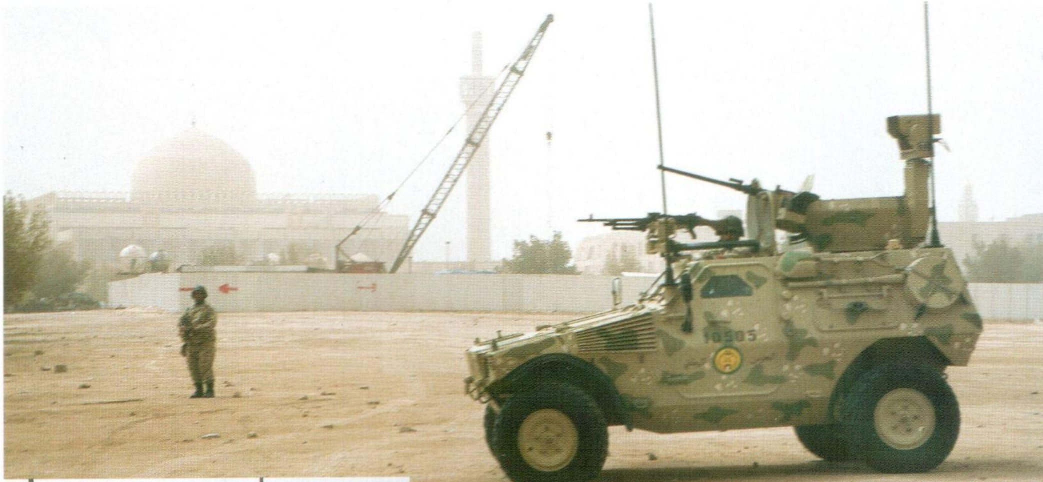


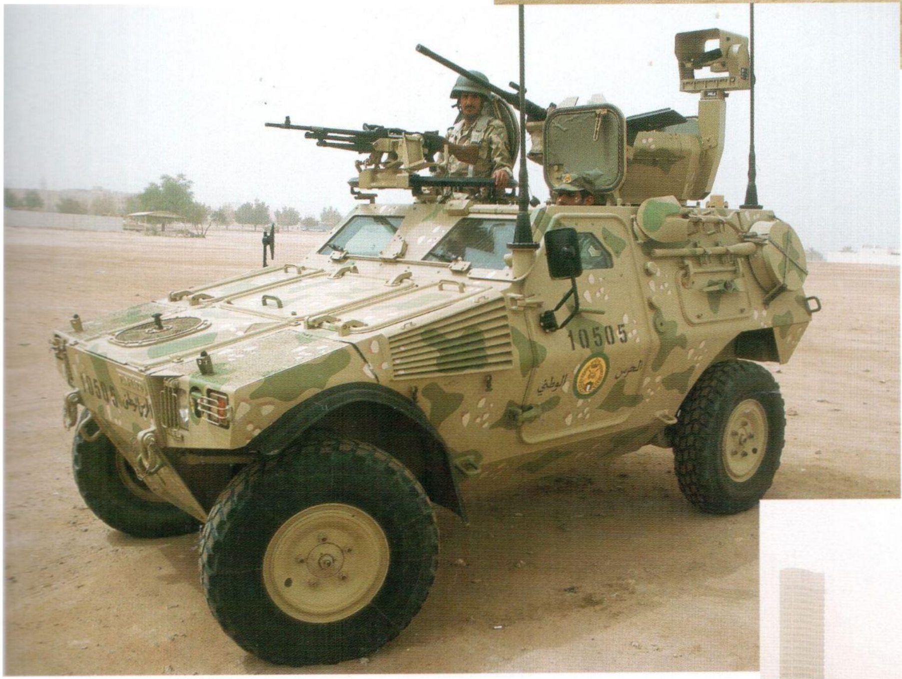
A sergeant of the National Guard stands guard duty in the center of the city. The troops in the Kuwait National Guard have tribal links with the Emir's family and they are real Kuwaitis, unlike the Army, which contains a number of foreign soldiers such as Pakistanis and Egyptians that come from the Muslim world. This man is armed with an M-4 carbine.



A German-made Hermelin APC is shown in position behind concrete and sand bags at one of the main crossroads in Kuwait City. Many of these vehicles were deployed. Note the .50-caliber machine gun and the blue urban camouflage.

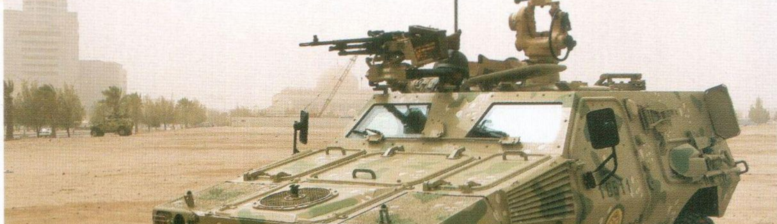
The recce and anti-tank squadron is equipped with the French-made VBL (Véhicule Blindée Léger *– Light Armored Vehicle) made by Panhard.*

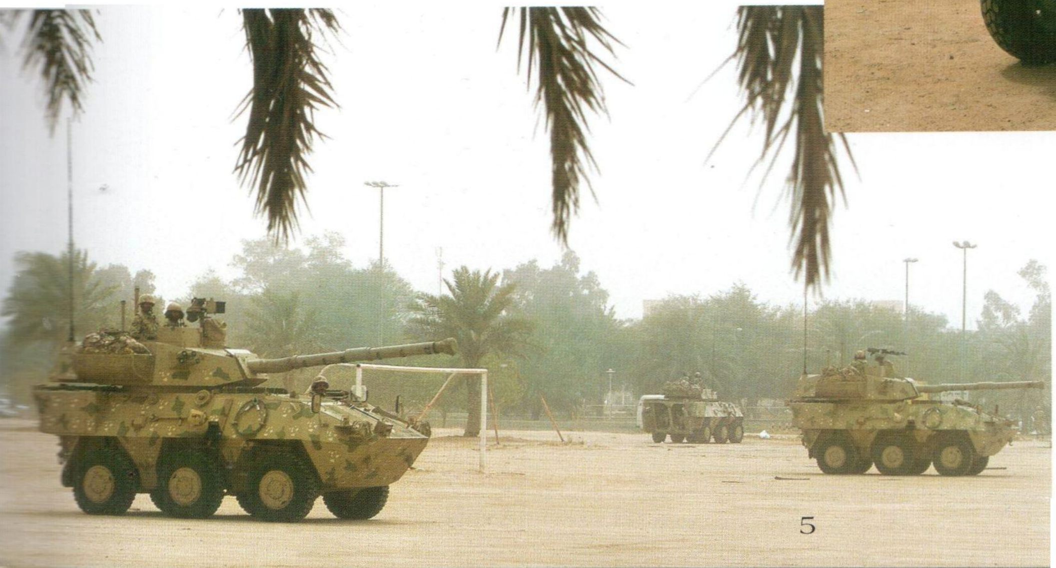




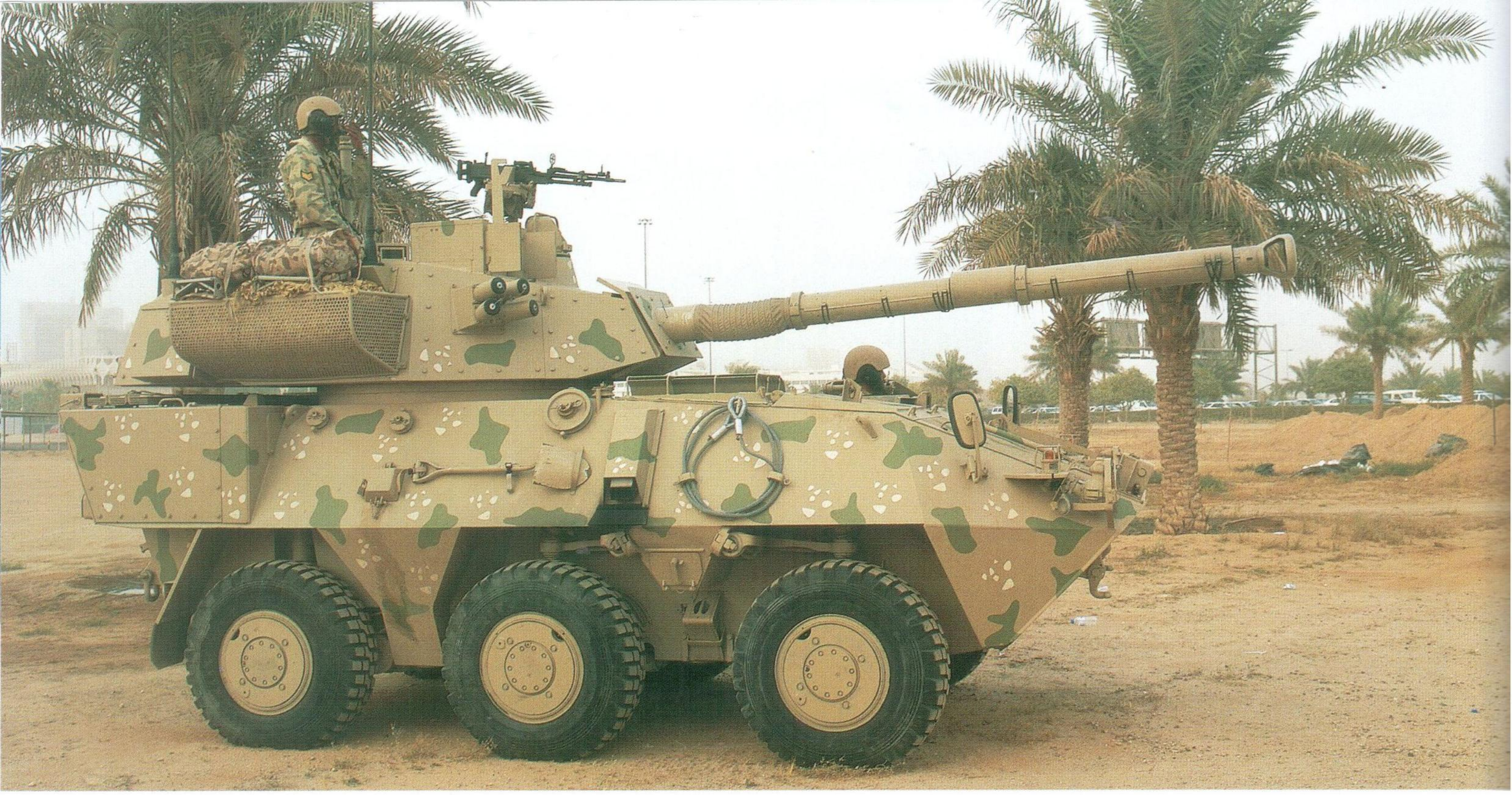
Eight reconnaissance versions of the VBL (like the one seen here) were ordered in 1996. It is armed with a 12.7mm machine gun and a MAG machine gun. The observation mast on the back can be fitted with SOPHIE NVG binoculars.

An order was also placed for 12 anti-tank TOW VBLs, as well. The TOW system is not mounted on this vehicle, however.

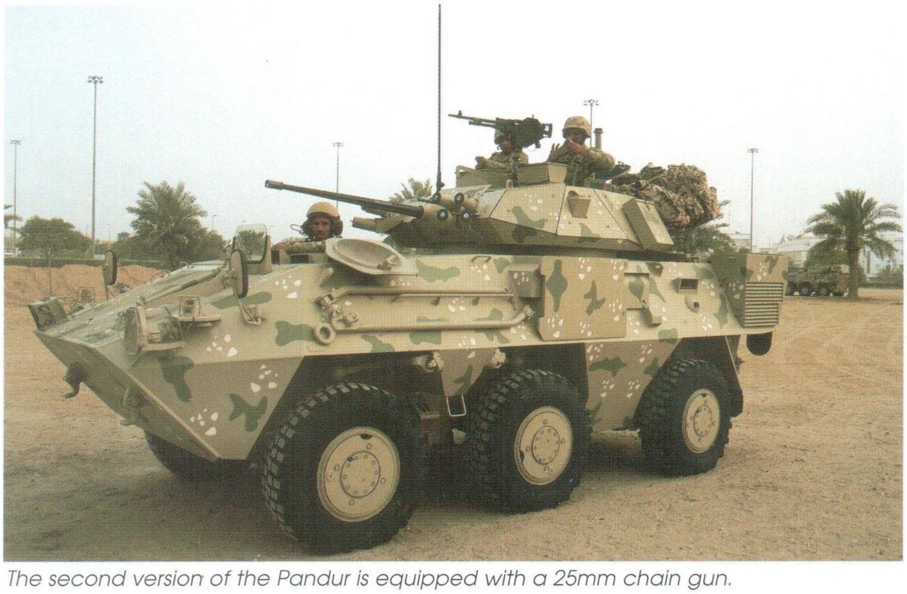




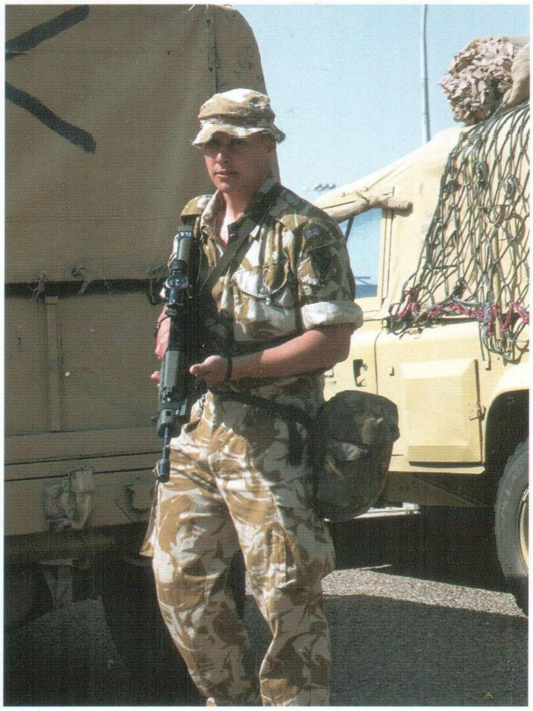
A Pandur, an Austrian-made APC belonging to the motorized infantry battalion of the Kuwait National Guard, was put to use as the war commenced.



A Pandur APC of the Kuwait National Guard takes up a position in front of a large telecommunications tower. Two versions of the Pandur are in service in the motorized infantry battalion of the Kuwait National Guard. This one is fitted with a 90mm Belgian Cockerill gun.

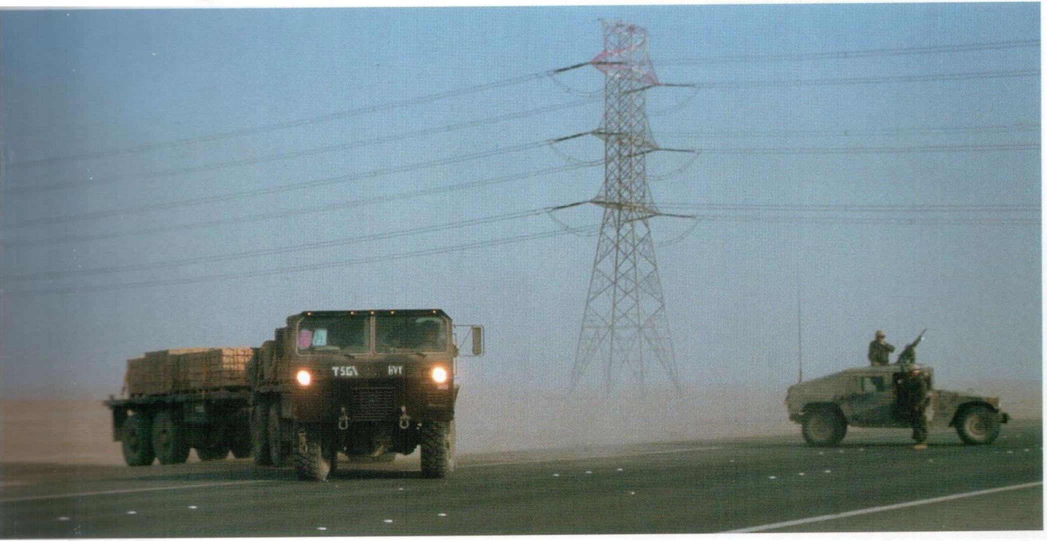


The second version of the Pandur is equipped with a 25mm chain gun.



"Rest Before Action." On 17 March, some members of the 16th Air Assault Brigade came to the Hotel Messiyah Beach in Kuwait to enjoy a swim. This is one of the would-be swimmers.

Several artillery paratroopers of the 7th Royal Horse Artillery watch activity in the area of the Kuwaiti hotel. For the author, the relaxed attitude of the British troops meant that the main assault was not going to occur on that day.



The best way to discover the departure position of the troops was to follow the logistic vehicles. Here a USMC convoy heads out along the logistic route known as Fox in the desert of Kuwait. A Humvee belonging to the USMC military police is positioned on the route being used to supply the troops waiting to attack Iraq. In order to perform his job properly, the non-embedded author and photojournalist was forced to play "cat and mouse" with the military police.

By 16 March, all of the major units had taken up position for the invasion of Iraq. The positions were supposed to be classified, but since Kuwait is such a small country many people knew basically where the units were situated. The journalists that were embedded with specific units began to get a feel for life on campaign. (Not so in my case. As a specialized journalist, I was not attached to any unit, and any photographs of US troops I took for this book were "illegal.")

At sunset on 19 March, the entire headquarters of the British 7th Armoured Brigade passed through Kuwait City heading north. It was one of the last convoys to pass through Kuwait in the days leading up to the attack. Oriented in a large arc heading toward Iraq were a variety of British and US units that included the following:

Stationed at sea were the 3rd Commando Brigade Royal Marines and the 15th USMC MEU, which were tasked with the capture of the Al Faw peninsula and the oil terminal before attacking Basra from the east.

The 7th Armoured Brigade, the famous "Desert Rats", reinforced by other elements of Her Majesty's Army, prepared to move on Basra, the second largest city in Iraq.

Being busy with the convoy, these military police troops pay no attention to the photographer. Later in Iraq, however, he got into several "skirmishes" with the MPs, who did not hesitate to threaten him with their weapons and use force to try to persuade him to return to the rear. But he insisted that the proper place for a correspondent for Concord Publications during wartime was to be on the firing line.

The British "Red Devils" paratroopers and the Irish Rangers, who formed the 16th Air Assault Brigade, were kept in reserve. All the specialists knew that their job would be to seize and hold an objective.

In the region of Oh Hulalba were positioned the "leathernecks" of the MEF (Marine Expeditionary Force) under the command of the 1st Marine Division. The press believed that the Marines would capture Basra along with the "Brits", but it was actually Baghdad that was the aiming point and ultimate target for the USMC.

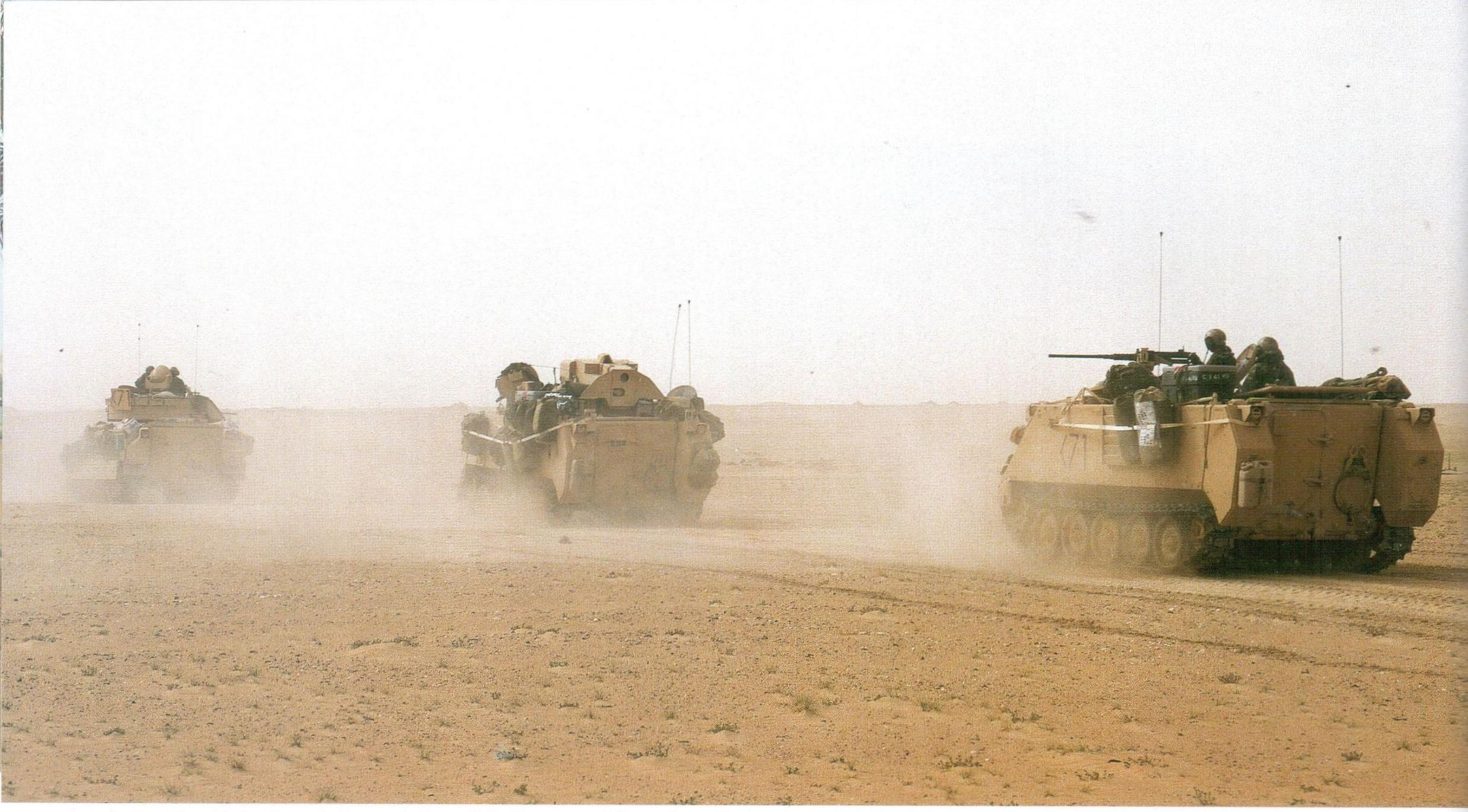
On the left flank of the Marines was the US Army's 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) reinforced by the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Armored Division "Old Ironside." All of these forces were mustered in the desert near Mutriba. Leading forces consisted of elements of the 2nd and 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiments and the organic 7th Cavalry, the famous Custer regiment, which act as the "eyes" of the US army as they serve as an advance guard. Not informed of their objective, it seemed logical that they would move against the city of Nasiriyah on the Euphrates River, the gateway to central Iraq.

Positioned far to the east, in the middle of the Kuwait desert, were the "Screaming Eagles" of the 101st Airborne Division. Trucks and Humvees were used to transport them, but "choppers" were not far away.

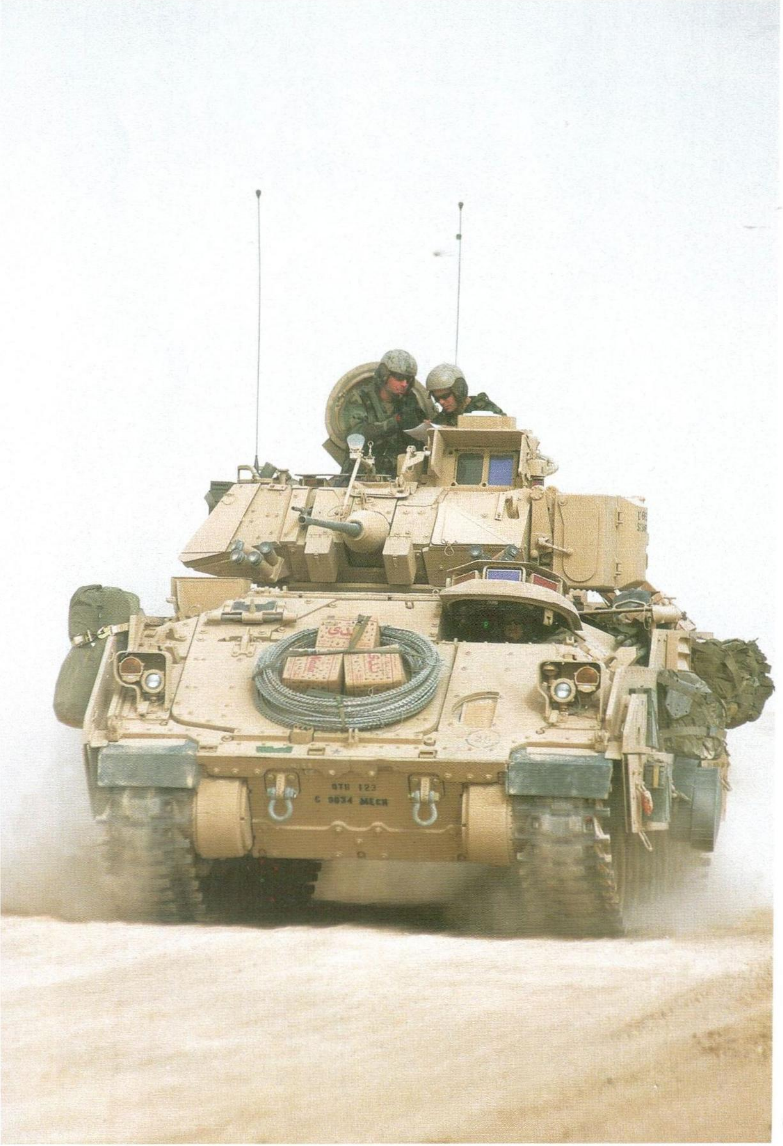
The legendary 82nd Airborne was kept in reserve, but rumors indicated that they would be parachuting into the international airport in Baghdad. However, except for some elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade who would later jump into Kurdistan, the paratroopers were not employed in their traditional role as an advance unit. Instead, they would be used to secure the supply routes as the army advanced.

Including the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) that was in transit on the Suez Canal (after the Turkish government would not allow the US to open a northern front from Turkey), the troops involved in the initial assault numbered 150,000 men ready to dash into Iraq. Added to that are the 150,000 members of the Navy and Air Force who supported Operation "Iraqi Freedom."

At first it seemed unwise for the generals at the Pentagon to attack Iraq with only six divisions, with two of them – the 101st and 82nd – being light divisions. But they believed that Iraq had been softened up by 12 years of sanctions and an air campaign that had been in effect since 1995.



A column of vehicles travels through the off-limits zone of Kuwait on their way to the border.



As a non-embedded journalist, a "wildcat", I have no other choice but to cross the border illegally along with the troops. While the rest of the journalists focus on Basra, I go due west into the desert. My hope is to join the 3rd Infantry Division and to cross the border into an unguarded zone. After traveling 200 kilometers and crossing over two anti-tank sand berms, I see some armored vehicles .

Other vehicles in the column make their way through the bleak desert environment.

An M-2 Bradley IFV (Infantry Fighting Vehicle) belonging to an unidentified unit of 3rd Infantry Division. It may be part of an MP battalion. One of the MP brigades received some Bradleys to secure the flank and rear. This photo was taken on the departure line, in the desert 200 kilometers west of Kuwait. The boxes with Arabic writing on them in the middle of the barbed wire on the hull of the vehicle contain water.

An M-88 recovery tank, with a gunner at the ready, speeds down a desert route.

After traveling 150 km alone in the desert, I discern in the light of sunset some Bradley IFVs and, later on, a large number of vehicles belonging to the 101st Airborne Division. Bingo! I have covered my red car in a mixture of Pepsi-Cola, sand, oil, and water, and used black tape to make a chevron of the coalition force. An orange air recognition panel is tied to the roof. From very far away my car could pass for a military vehicle.

In the last light of day I join a column of Humvees and trucks. With the dust they kick up, I think I have a chance. Four kilometers before the border all the vehicles stop and form three columns for refueling. Nobody looks at me. I am right in the middle of a brigade of the 101st. The moon is full. On 20 March, all of the vehicles, maybe 400 of them, start their engines. Just when think I will be crossing the border soon, a large civilian 4x4 turns around the three columns and comes close to me. Then it stops.

"Who are you?" asks a loud voice. "Which unit are you with?"

"I'm a military correspondent," I reply. "I'm sorry I missed Bastogne, so I'd like to go to Baghdad with the Screaming Eagles. Can you help me? I wish to speak to an officer."

"I am General Sinclair, the commander of this brigade," the voice replies. "What are you doing here? Who told you we were here? Don't move, I'm calling the MPs."

So went my first capture during the war, which would not yet officially begin for a few hours.

The US Army has used the M-113 in different incarnations for decades. It made yet another appearance in Operation "Iraqi Freedom". Some of the vehicles bore the markings "9034 mech," possibly the number of a task force put together just for the operation.

Frustrated while I watch the vehicles begin their move to the border, I am immediately transferred to the tactical HQ. There, two majors, one the "good" guy and the other the "bad" guy, interrogate me. They are totally amazed that a journalist who did not have a GPS or a sat telephone had penetrated the secret departure position of the 101st. My car and my body are thoroughly searched, and my aviation map confiscated.

The General, who is not a bad guy, came to talk to me for a few minutes. "I'm sorry I can't take you with us," he says. "The procedure is too complicated."

At four o'clock in the morning, two Humvees arrive carrying two MPs. For a second time, they perform a complete search of my car and my body. One of them takes my keys, then ties me to the roof of a Humvee with plastic handcuffs. After we drive for an hour, the convoy stops at the gate of a Kuwaiti air base where the MPs deliver me to Kuwaiti Special Branch, who interrogate me twice. The next morning, I am transferred to Kuwait City, where I am questioned yet again. This time it is by a small bald officer from military security.

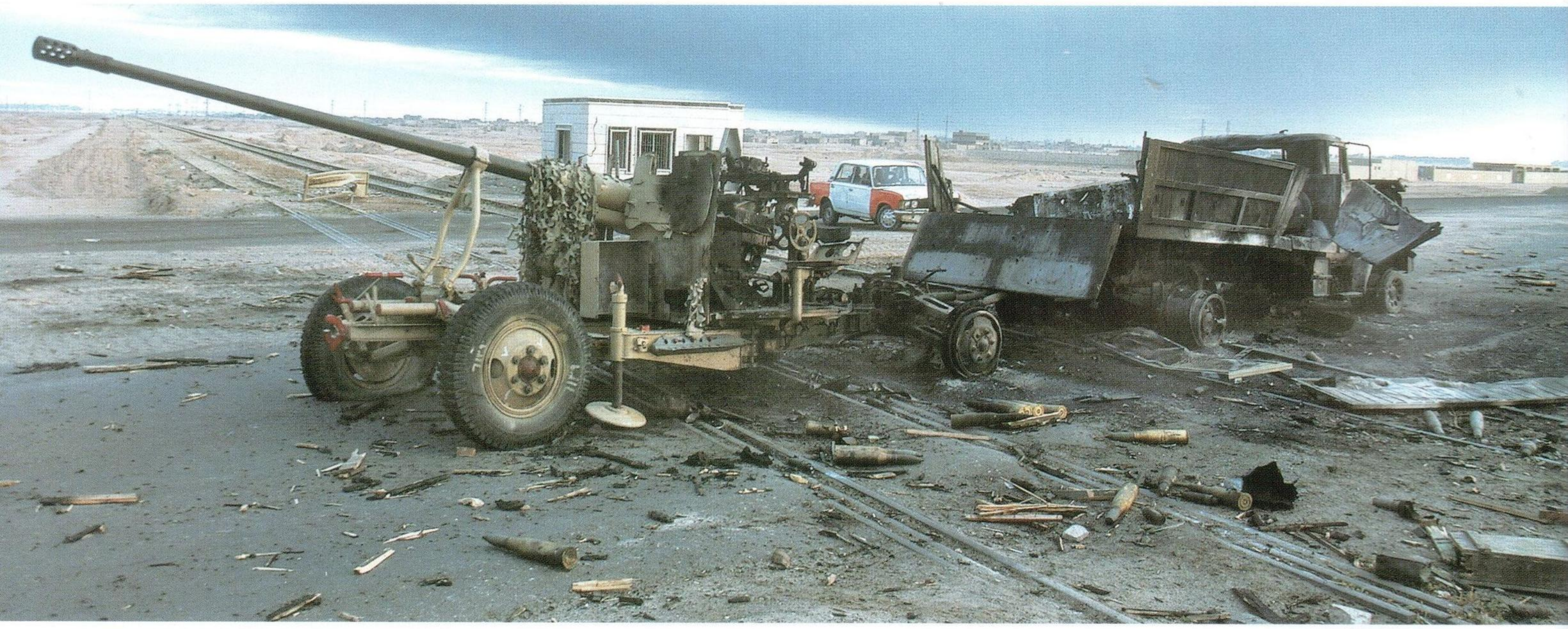
"What you did is very, very bad," he says. "Your car is camouflaged, you are in a secret area, and you have a camouflaged suit in your pack. Very, very bad!" Then he adds, "Do you want a chocolate? I am sorry, but the American wishes that we expel you."

The Kuwaiti people are good people. I recognize that I was guilty of being in a forbidden area, and as a consequence they confiscate my camera and seize my Kuwaiti press card. One of the majors of the 101st had already taken away my coalition accreditation (which was totally useless in my case).

By noon I am a free man, and I immediately go to the French Embassy. The press attaché makes a phone call to his American colleague, and a few hours later my camera is returned to me, along with my car, which is shiny and clean from the wash job some soldiers gave it. (The Americans only seized two rolls of film.)

The war was now 12 hours old, and I needed to make up for lost time and attempt once again to cross the border.

Slowed Down but Still Advancing



The "Desert Rats" destroyed this Iraqi S-60 anti-aircraft gun and its tractor 20 km south of Basra. Though the gun is old, it still could be effective for an anti-aircraft barrage.

Rarely in the history of modern warfare have the press revealed the aims and objectives of a campaign or the confidences of some headquarters officer more than is this war. As a result, the general public and, of course, the Iraqis knew that the first target would be Basra and that Baghdad would be attacked at the same time.

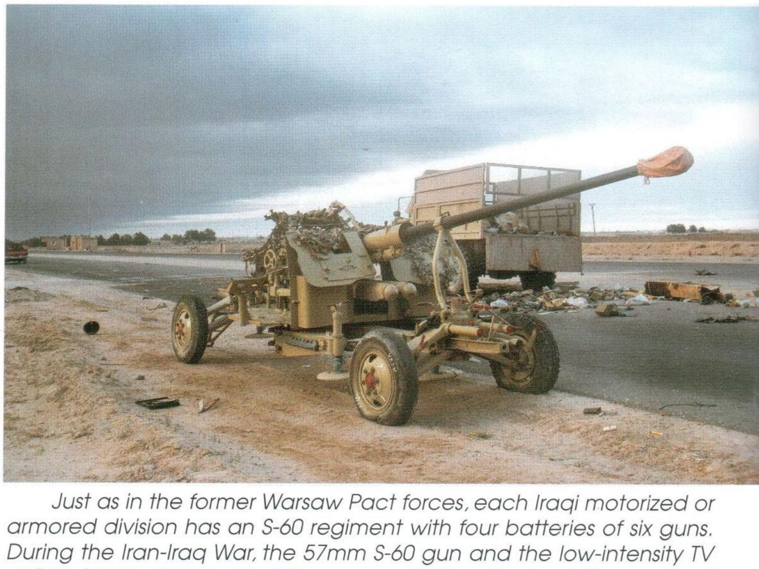
Basra, the second largest city in Iraq with 5 million inhabitants, and the main objective for the British, would not be taken by a *blitzkrieg*-like action. It would take more than a week for the "Desert Rats" to isolate the city. Under a new military command led by the notorious "Chemical Ali," the Iraqi forces would slow down the British with a certain degree of efficiency. The "Desert Rats" and the Marines took no risks and entrusted the aviation units with reducing major resistance. The British HQ knew that the war was not too popular in the UK and that public opinion would not support heavy casualties. So the advance on Basra was accomplished with a slow, steady rugby-style persistence rather than by a speedy advance.

At Umm Qasr, determined Iraqis held the harbor area for a full week against 42 Commando of the Royal Marines and the USMC's 15th MEU. But the coalition forces took it relatively easy because they did not want to see the harbor destroyed.

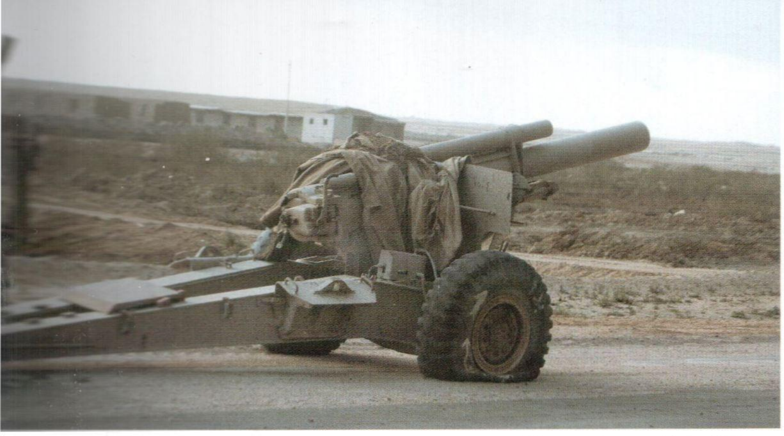
On the afternoon of 22 March, I am near the northern border of the emirate traveling through the desert to avoid the checkpoints of the Kuwaiti police on the main road. My problem now is how to cross the double fence that is being watched by the Kuwaiti border guard. The area is still off-limits, and non-embedded journalists caught inside could be expelled from Kuwait.

At sunset, I see a British convoy on its way to Iraq. I manage to put my car inside and follow a truck . . . very closely. Still, a Kuwaiti border guard sees me and runs to his 4x4 to pursue me, but he is 500 meters behind. Quickly I overtake the convoy and disappear in their dust. At the second fence, there is no reaction from the Kuwaiti soldiers. A few kilometers later I am in Iraq. I spend the night not far from where I was captured by the Iraqi Republican Guard 12 years earlier.

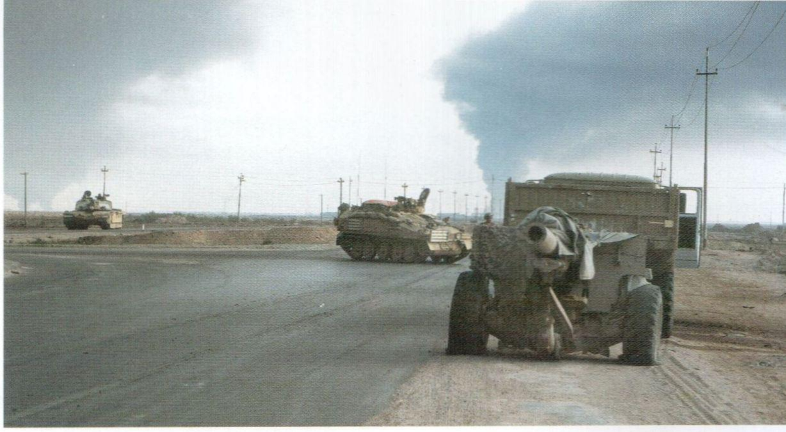
The 179th Brigade of the Iraqi Army, which may be a unit belonging to the 5th Division, was in charge of defending Basra. A lot of abandoned and destroyed equipment was encountered during the advance on the city. This photograph was taken on 23 March at 0700.



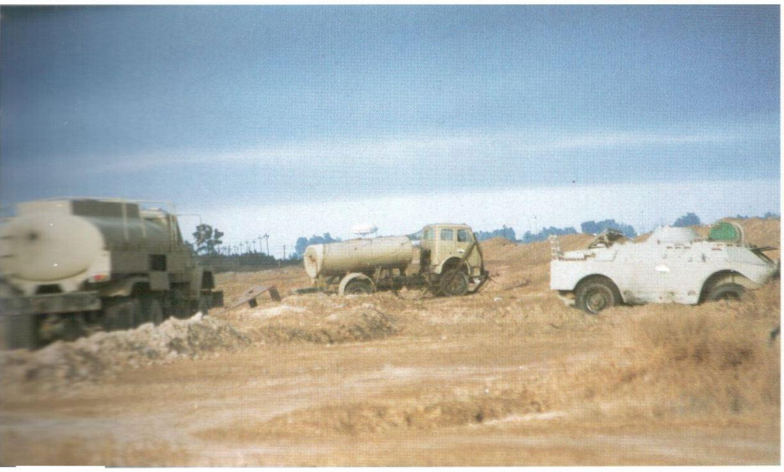
Just as in the former Warsaw Pact forces, each Iraqi motorized or armored division has an S-60 regiment with four batteries of six guns. During the Iran-Iraq War, the 57mm S-60 gun and the low-intensity TV system teamed up against the enemy air force to shoot down several F-5 and F-4 Phantoms. In Operation "Iraqi Freedom," this kind of gun damaged several AH-64s in the Baghdad area.



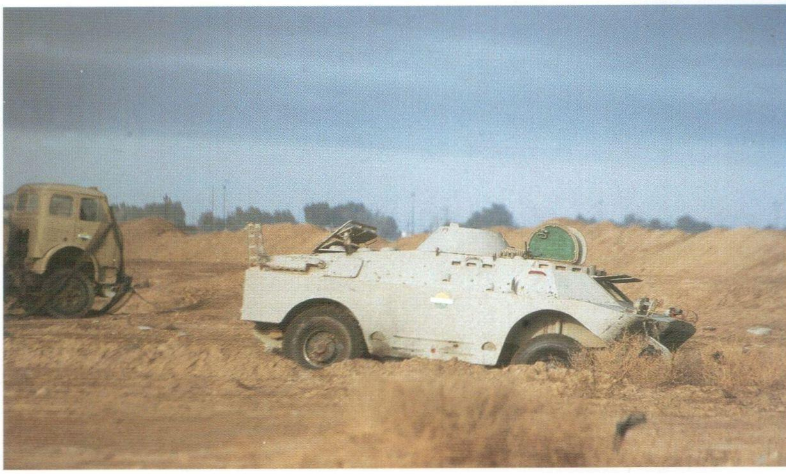
Iraq had more than just Soviet-made artillery pieces. This 155mm M-114 remains intact, though its tractor was destroyed. The gun itself has a rather nasty flat tire.



The 155mm gun was probably captured from the Iranians, who have a large number of US-made equipment in their arsenal. In the background is a Spartan belonging to the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers.

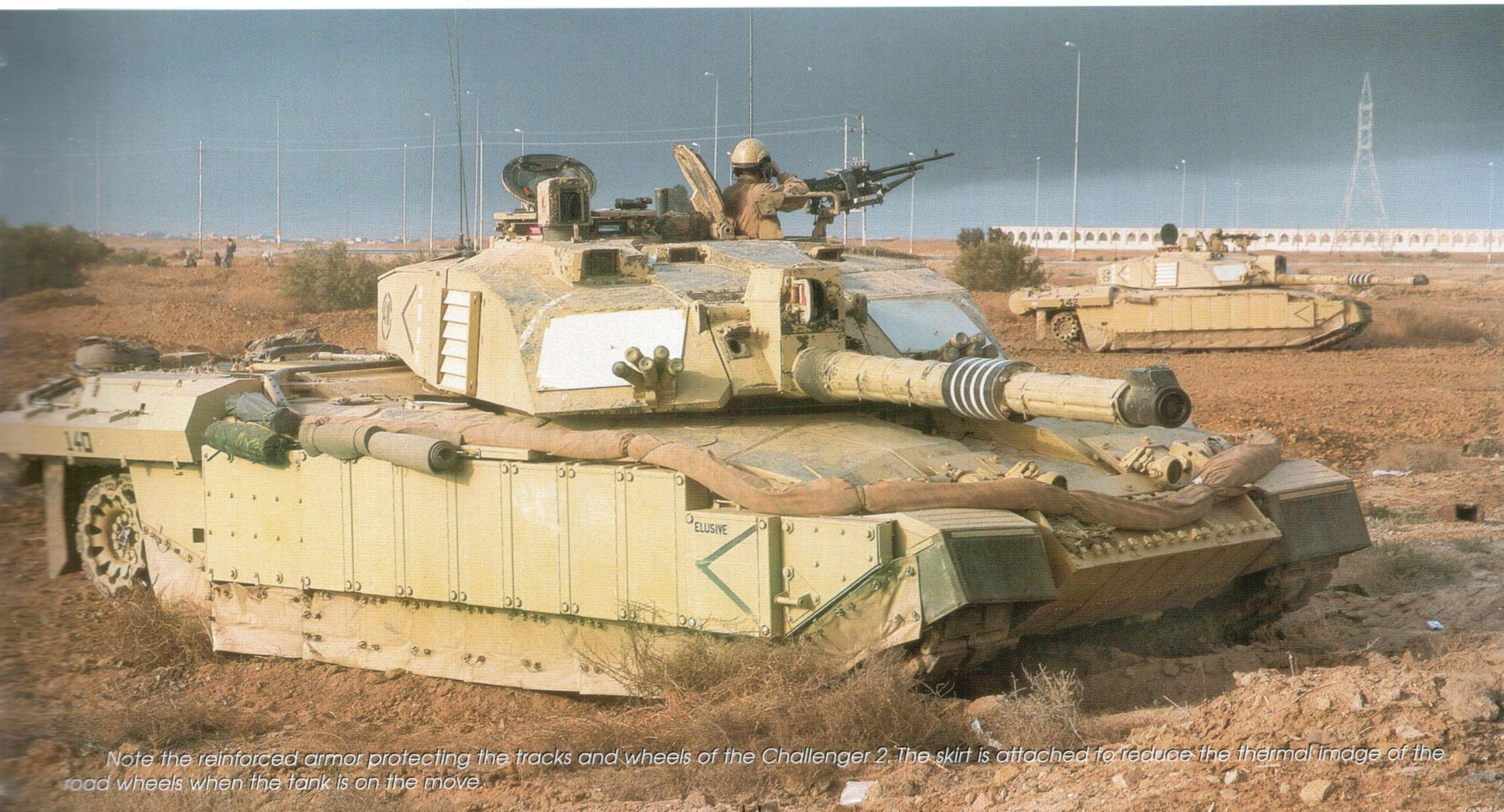


A BRDM-2 and two fuel trucks sit abandoned on the side of the road, more wreckage from the advance toward Basra.

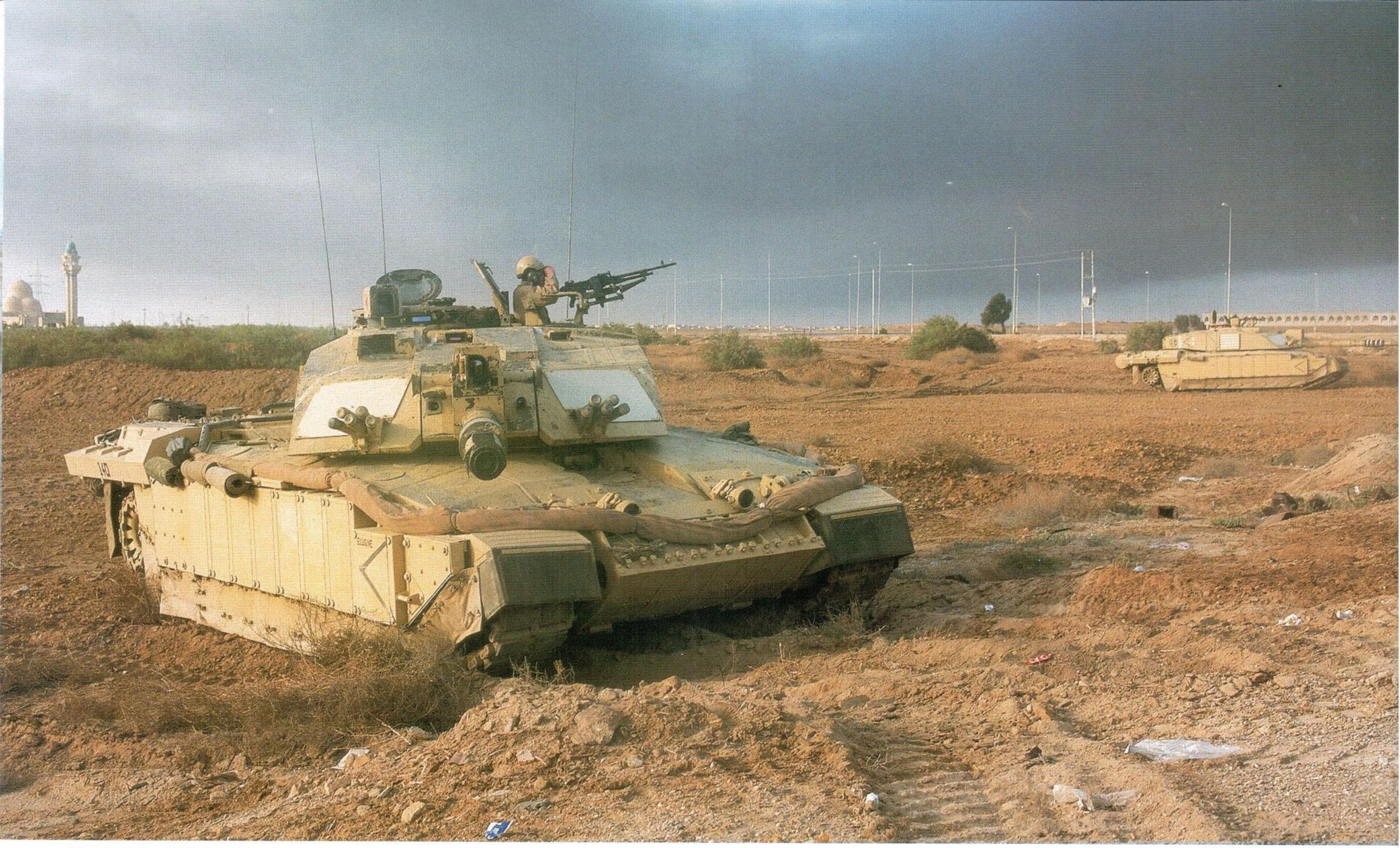


The orange, green and white circle on the BRDM-2 has the brigade number "179" in Arabic in the center.

Desert Rats and Operation "Telic"



Note the reinforced armor protecting the tracks and wheels of the Challenger 2. The skirt is attached to reduce the thermal image of the road wheels when the tank is on the move.



23 March. 0700. A Challenger 2 of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards takes up a position 20 km south of Basra.

Twenty kilometers south of Basra, the "Desert Rats" engaged an Iraqi rear guard. The resistance appeared to be from an isolated element. Though the main part of the Iraqi force had withdrawn into Basra, a large number of soldiers remained in the area, which contained numerous barracks because of its proximity to the Iranian border.

A platoon of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards took up a position behind a sand berm or dyke to wait and observe. A few Iraqis surrendered. Further up the road, on the sight of a piece of destroyed Iraqi artillery, a Spartan belonging to the 1st Bn, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers blocked the road. A soldier thoughtfully invited the author to wait there because up the road some distance a pocket of resistance is being annihilated. To confirm this fact, a Challenger of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment overtook us, stopped and began to open fire with its coaxial machine gun. A few Warriors from the Black Watch rejoined the MBT and engaged the unseen enemy with their 30mm guns. A few minutes later, all the armored vehicles withdrew, and an artillery barrage fell on the Iraqi position.

"To reach Basra, we have to cross four big ditches filled with water mixed with oil. It won't be easy," soldiers of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers informed the author.

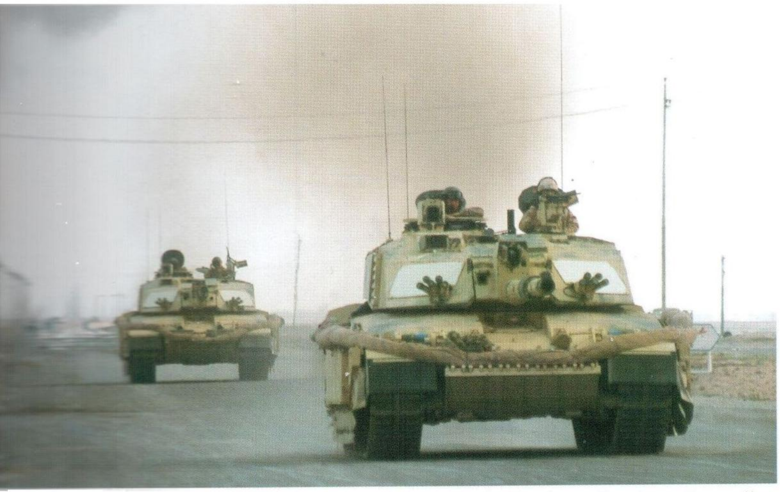
Organization of the 7th Armoured Brigade "Desert Rats"

Royal Scots Dragoon Guards	60 Challenger 2
2nd Royal Tank Regiment	60 Challenger 2
1st Bn, The Black Watch	52 Warrior
1st Bn, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	52 Warrior
Elements of the 1st Bn, Irish Guards	Warriors
Elements of The Queen's Royal Lancers	Scimitar-Spartan
Elements of the 1st Bn, The Light Infantry	Warriors
3rd Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery	32 AS-90
32nd Armoured Engineer Regiment	
Elements of the 26th Regiment, Royal Artillery	
Elements of the 38th Engineer Regiment	

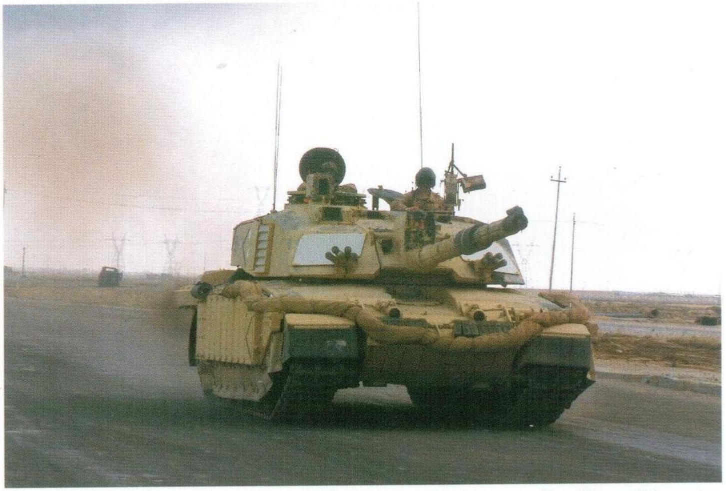
A lieutenant of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards searches for prisoners. Many Iraqi soldiers dressed in civilian clothes to escape capture.

A Spartan and some soldiers of the 1st Bn, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers block the road. A skirmish occurred where the vehicles in the background are located.

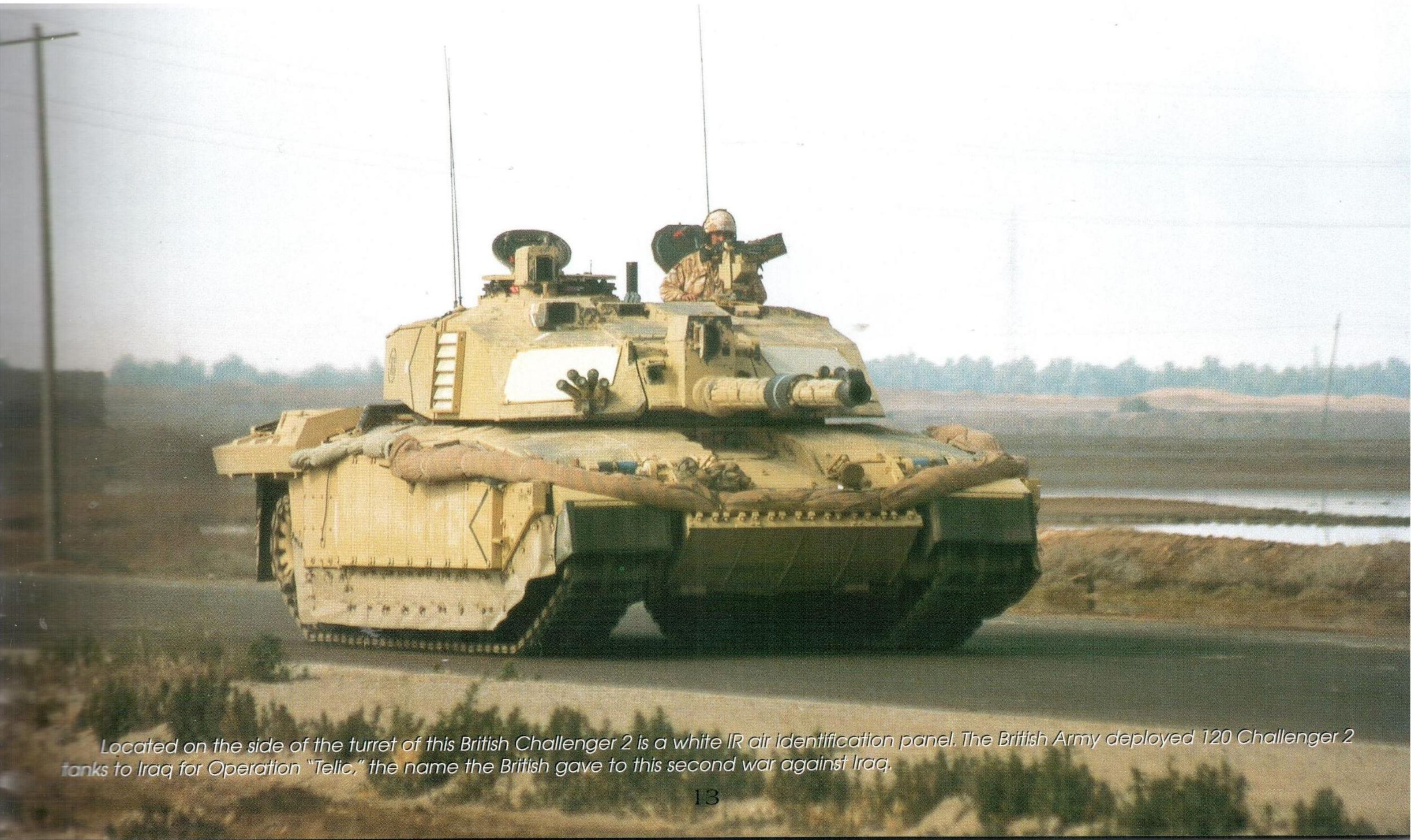
A Challenger 2 of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment opens fire with its coaxial machine gun. The impact point can be seen just behind the destroyed Iraqi truck.



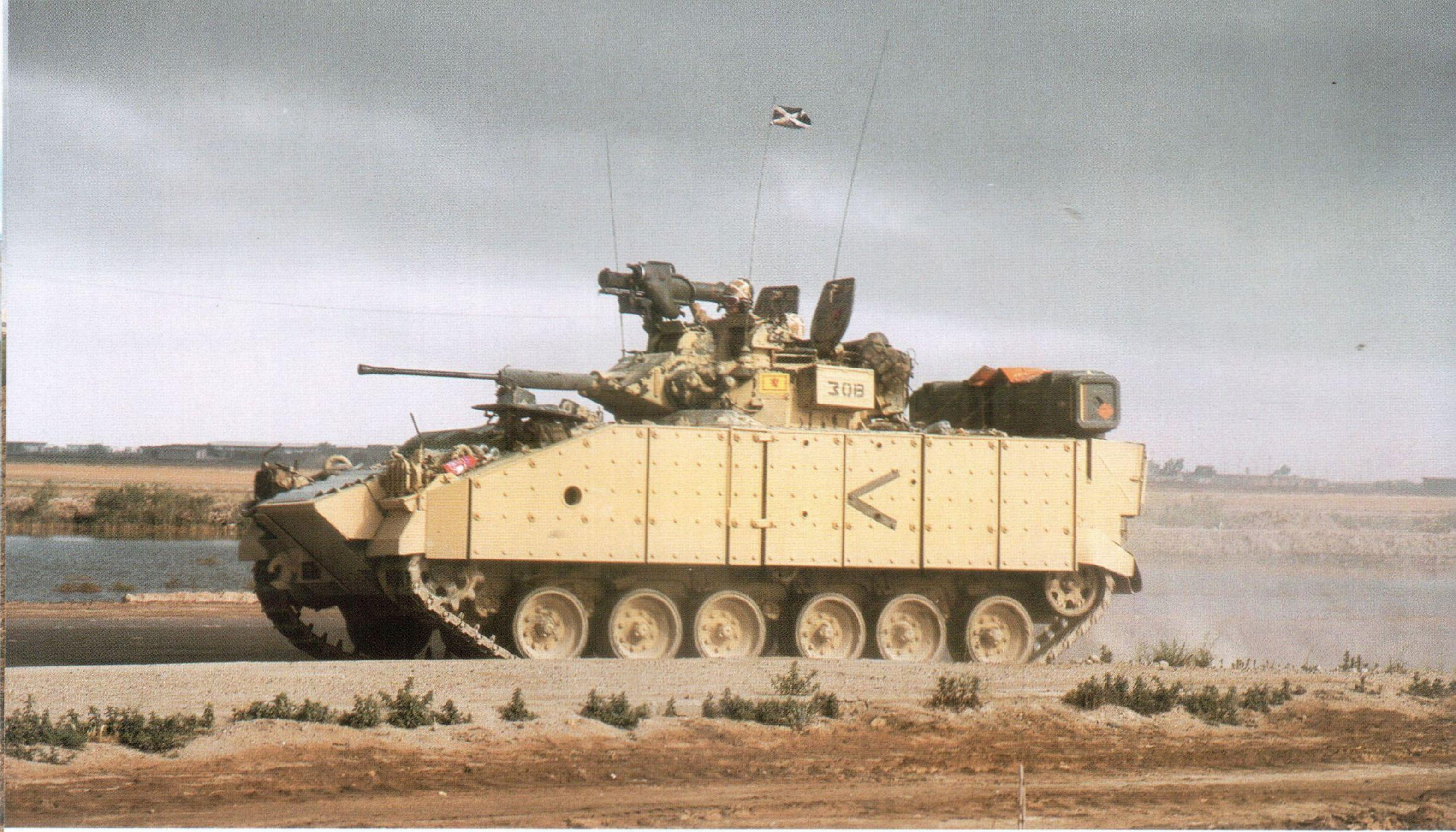
Challenger 2s of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment return from the front line.



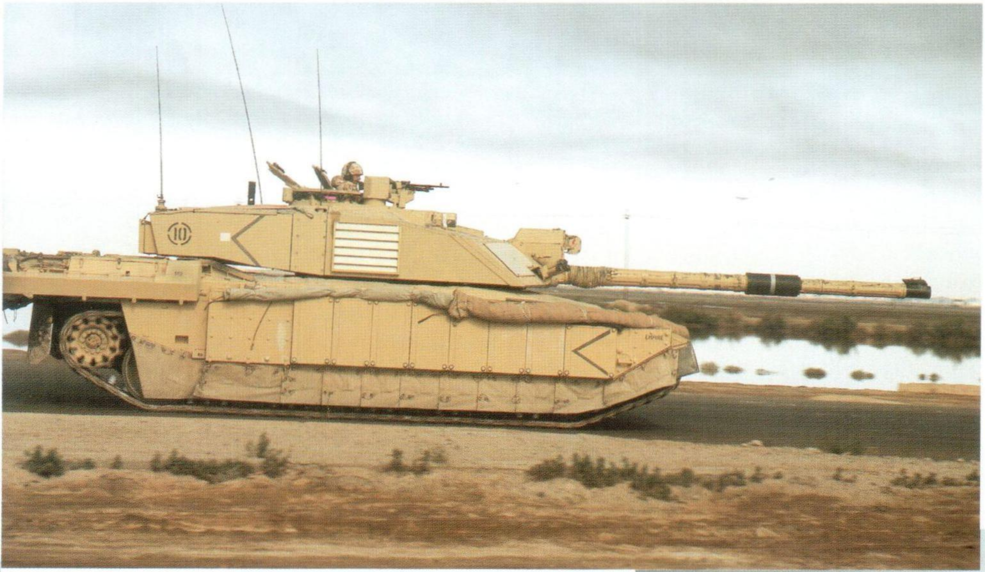
Though the white air identification panel seems like it would make an excellent aiming point for the Iraqis, it served to protect the tank crew from friendly fire.



Located on the side of the turret of this British Challenger 2 is a white IR air identification panel. The British Army deployed 120 Challenger 2 tanks to Iraq for Operation "Telic," the name the British gave to this second war against Iraq.



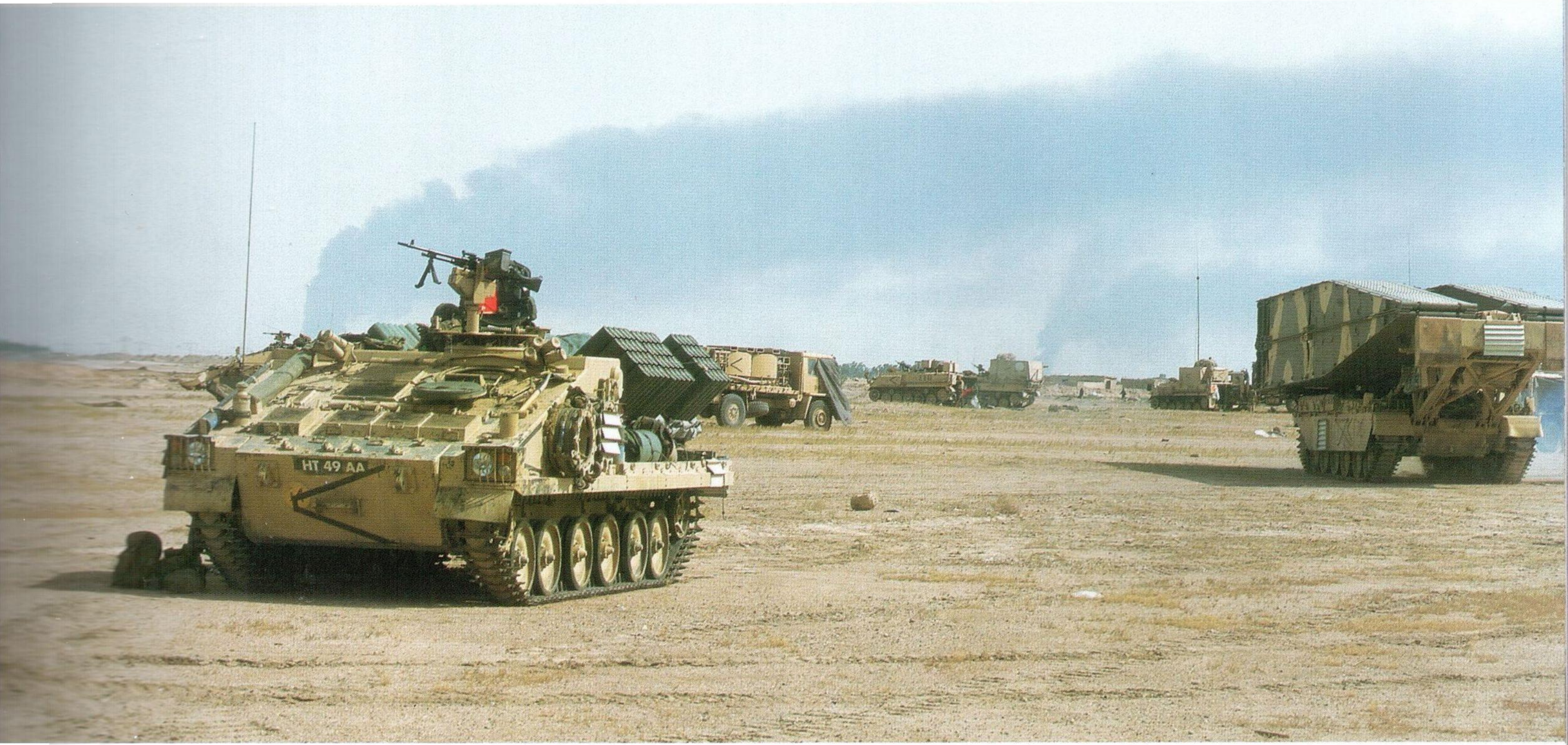
Note the MILAN missile post on this British Warrior. The vehicle also bears the Scottish coat-of-arms with the red lion, and there is a small Scottish flag on the antenna.



This profile photograph of a Challenger 2 provides a good look at the white IR air identification panel and the skirt that covers the road wheels. A small gerboa is painted on the searchlight.

A Warrior from the Black Watch withdraws to avoid being hit by artillery fire. A total of 150 Warrior infantry fighting vehicles were deployed to Iraq.

US Marines at Al Zubayr



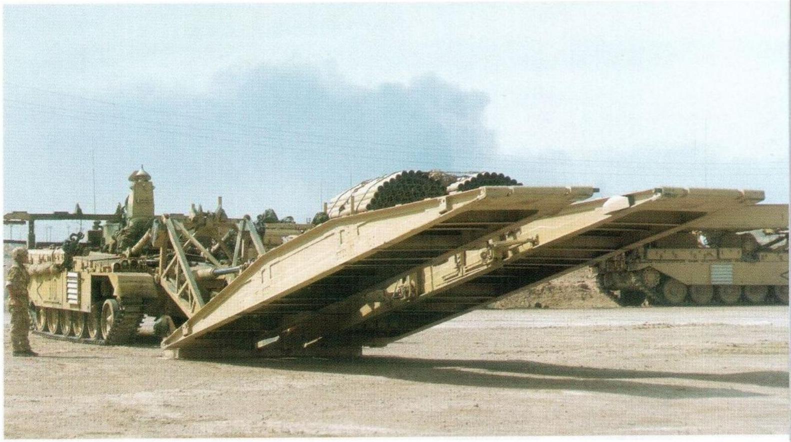
In the left foreground, a Shielder, an armored vehicle used to quickly lay down a minefield, makes its way across the Iraqi desert. In the background a bridge-laying vehicle is visible traveling in the opposite direction.

The primary objective of the MEF (Marine Expeditionary Force) was to capture the Rumaila oil fields and secure Al Zubayr in coordination with the British. Al Zubayr was one of the "bolts" in the Basra "door." Situated southwest of the city, it was occupied by an Iraqi brigade.

After intensive aerial bombing and artillery preparation, the 5th and 7th Marines took the oil pumping stations on 22 March. Oil was not the main stake of this war, but it was a major strategic factor. Iraq has the second largest and cheapest-to-exploit oil reserves in the world. The capture of the oil production facilities was crucial for maintaining the financial security of the nation.

Terrified by the air assaults, the Iraqi soldiers disbanded, leaving a vast amount of equipment intact. The US Marines advanced to the northwest, letting the "Desert Rats" take care of the remaining pockets of resistance before the main assault on Basra.

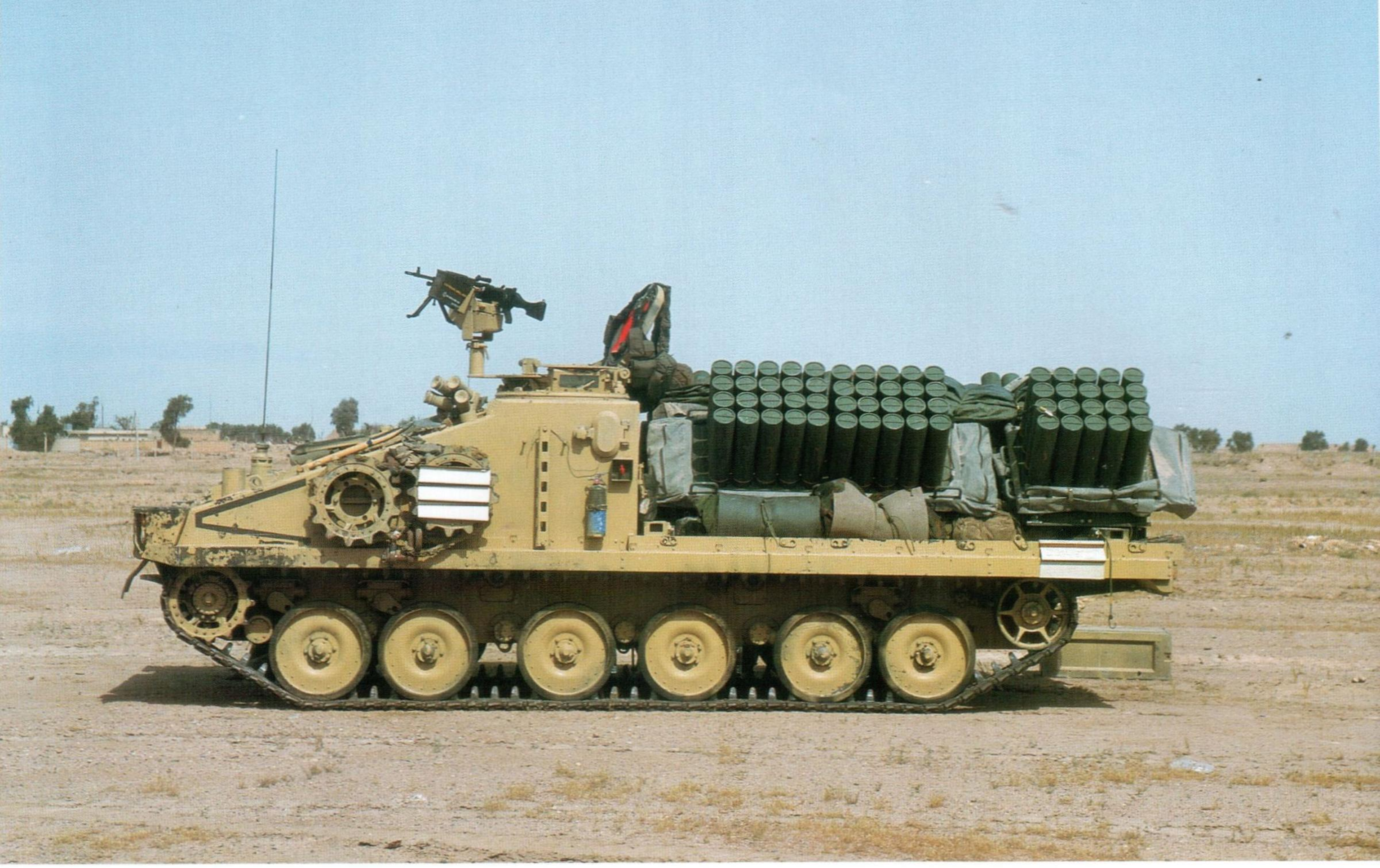
The following photographs were taken at 0900 on 23 March in the vicinity of Al Zubayr.



Beside the British 7th Armoured Brigade headquarters, the 32nd Armoured Engineer Regiment awaits orders. Here is some of the tools of the trade for the unit, a bridge-layer and a fascine carrier, both of which were essential to success in Iraq.

The 32nd Armoured Engineer Regiment also fields fascine carriers built on the chassis of a Centurion main battle tank.

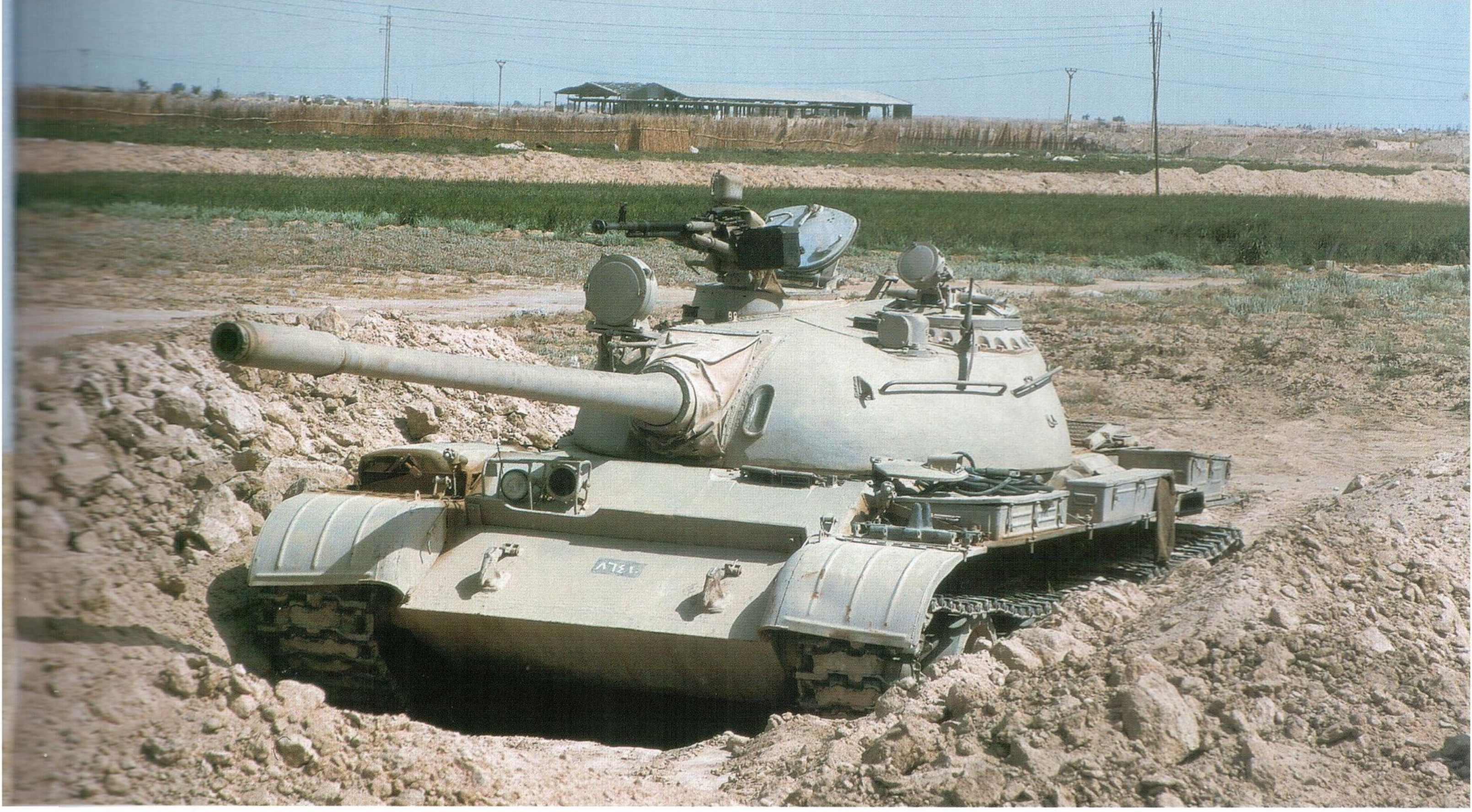
The British bridge-laying vehicles and fascine carriers were useful tools in this war. They made it possible to cross the numerous ditches encountered on the road to Basra.



Here we see an excellent profile view of a Shielder. The Shielder minelayer is mounted on the chassis of a Stormer armored personnel carrier.

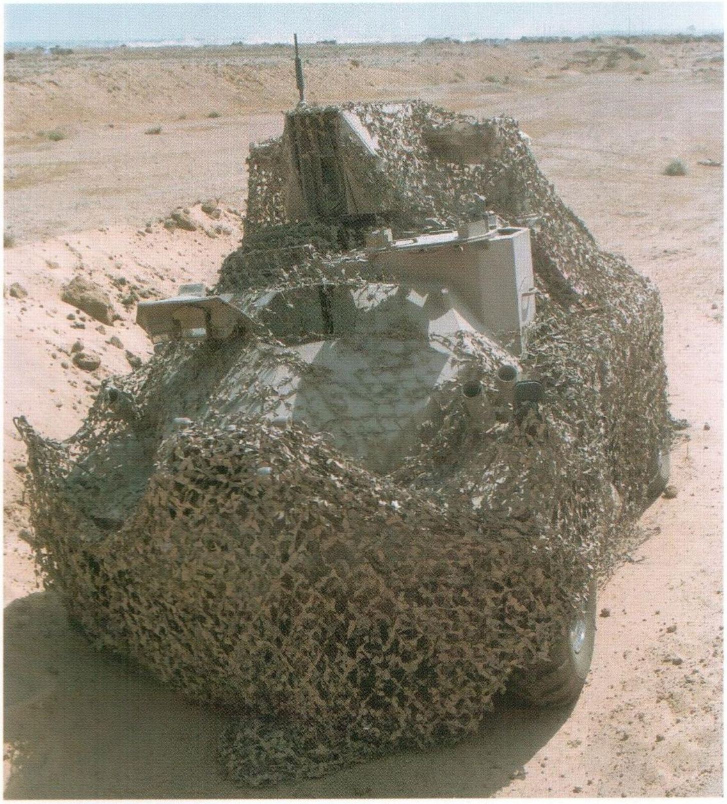
Due to the lack of aggressiveness on the part of the Iraqi forces in the Basra area, there was never a need to employ the Shielder.

These American officers were probably attached to the British headquarters as liaison officers in charge of tactical air support.



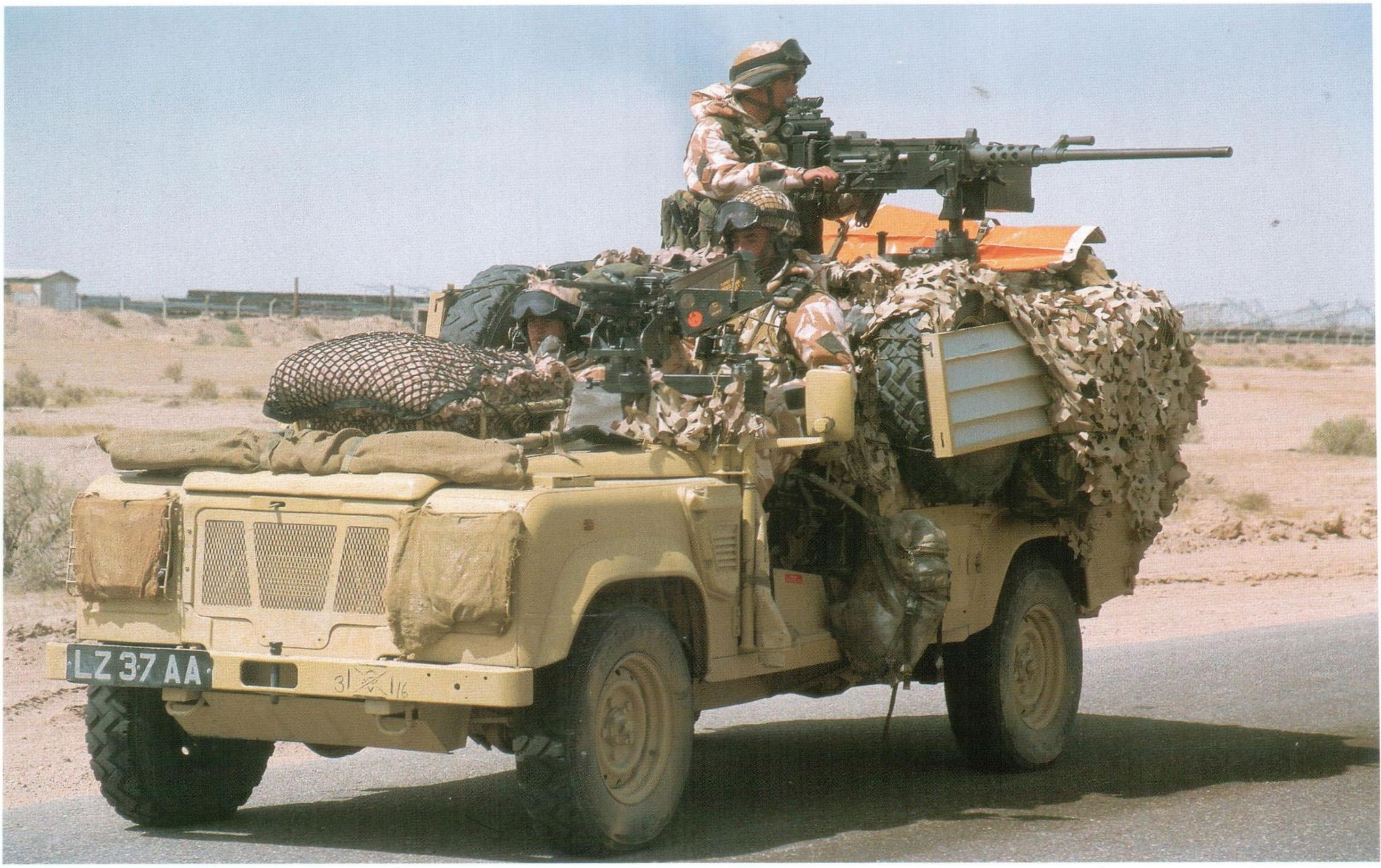
This Iraqi T-55 was abandoned without any shells being fired from its 100mm gun. Along with several others, this tank was dug-in without any plan for maneuvering. It would be a permanent feature throughout the campaign.

An American officer studies a map of Iraq, thousands of which were printed in the USA in preparation for the invasion of that country.

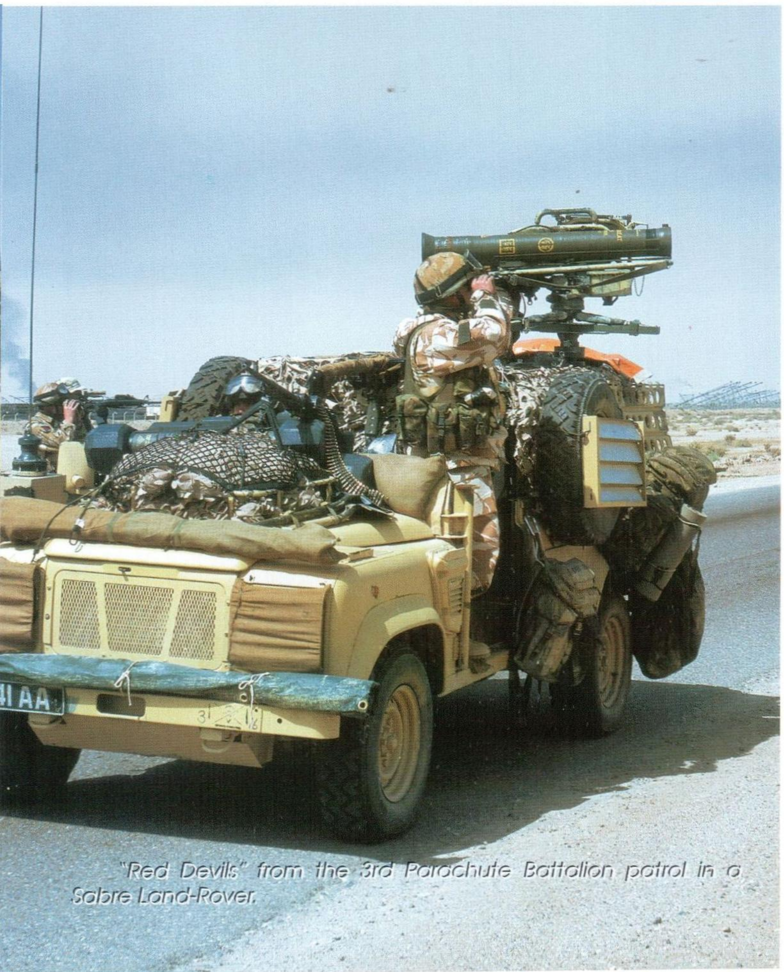


The crew of this French-made Panhard M-3 armed with a HOT anti-tank missile abandoned it without putting up a fight. Used properly, this kind of armored vehicle could prove very dangerous to a coalition tank. A HOT is able to destroy a Challenger 2 at 4000 meters. However, the Iraqi army seems to be locked into the static-firing trap inherited from Soviet doctrine. Even though it would be difficult to maneuver the vehicle without air superiority, a minimum of tactical sense would enable the Iraqis to inflict numerous losses on the coalition forces. In 1989, Iraq received about one hundred M-3 HOT vehicles.

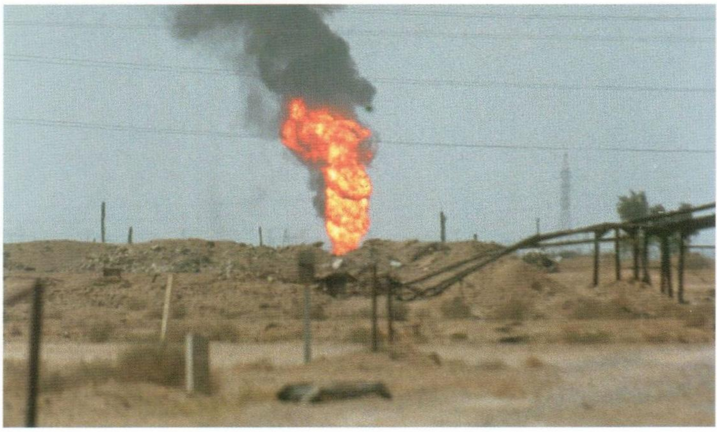
Red Devils and Oil Fields



This Sabre operated by the Red Devils is armed with a .50-caliber machine gun.



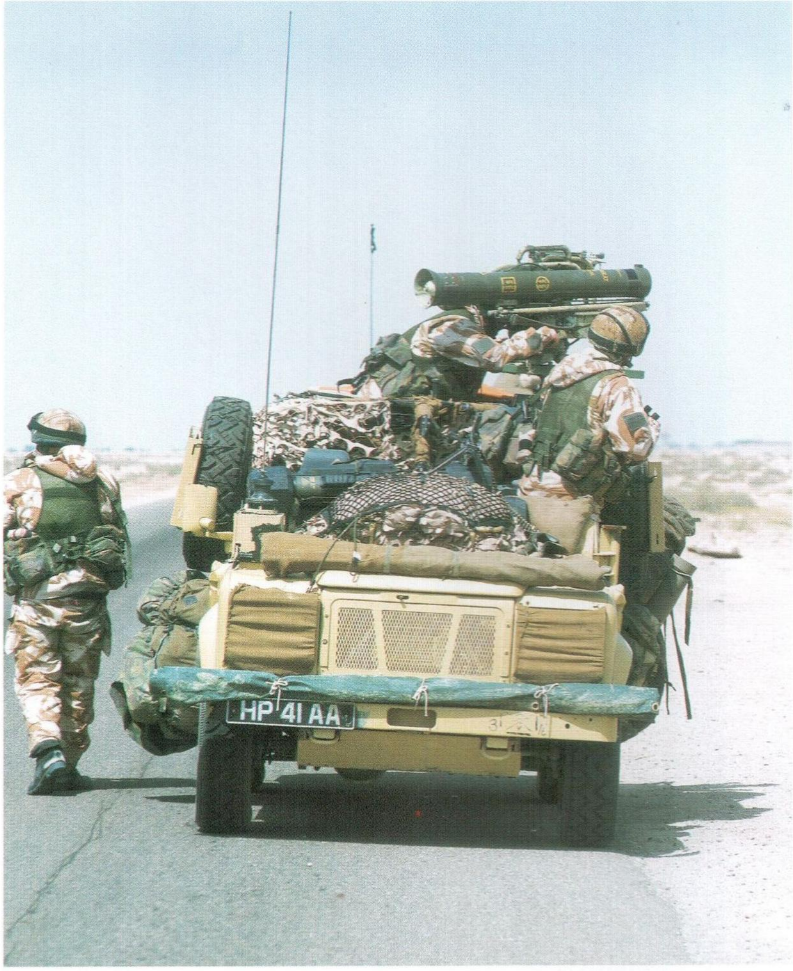
"Red Devils" from the 3rd Parachute Battalion patrol in a Sabre Land-Rover.



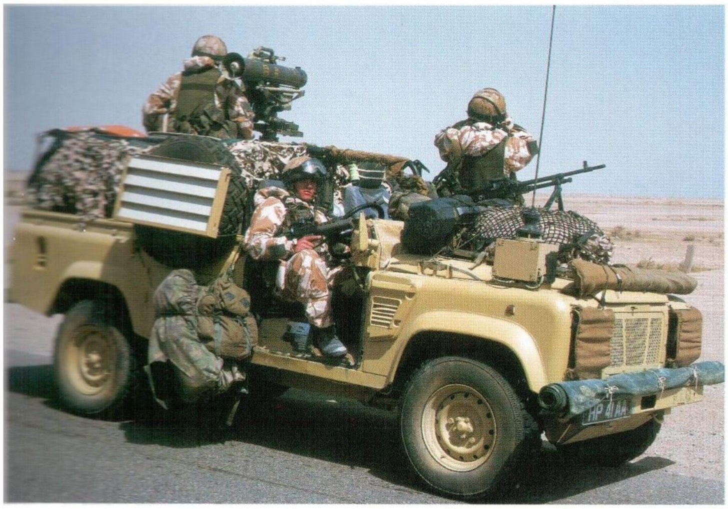
A captured oil well that was set afire by the fleeing Iraqi soldiers. The rapid intervention of the 16th Air Assault Brigade and the well-orchestrated distribution of propaganda leaflets prevented the sabotage of a large number of oil installations.

One of the first missions of the coalition forces was to seize and hold the oil installations of southern Iraq. The famous 16th Air Assault Brigade, with the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment, would capture without any organized resistance one of the richest oil fields in the world: Al Rumaila and the nearby refinery. Facing a quick and brutal heliborne assault, Iraqis could only set fire to very few oil wells. Al Rumaila would not be Arnhem, and Saddam's army would never attempt a counterattack to recapture the place that is so important to the future of Iraq.

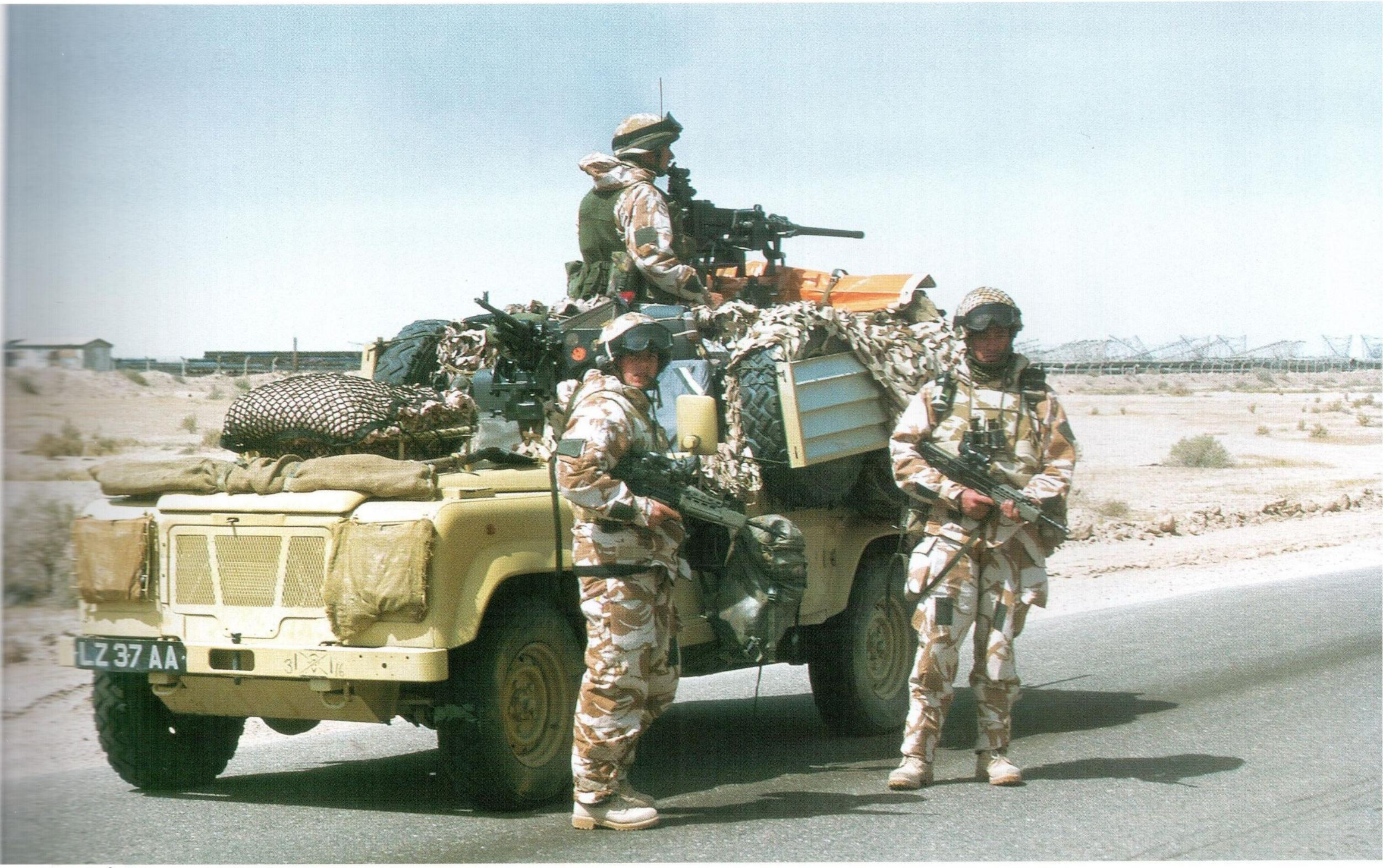
The following pictures were taken on 23 March around 1100, when the paras were patrolling in search of any Iraqi troop movement and to prevent the sabotage of the wells.



British paratroops patrol along the northern ridges of the famous oil fields at A1 Rumaila.



Another weapon that was seen mounted on the Sabre vehicles of 3 Para was the MILAN anti-tank system. All of the Land Rovers were fitted with two or three IR air identification panels.



Though the troops of 3 Para were well armed and highly mobile, they still were vulnerable to mortar and artillery fire.

Along with their great rivals, the Royal Marines, the British paratroops are some of the best soldiers in the coalition forces, even though they are only lightly armed with SA-80 assault rifles.

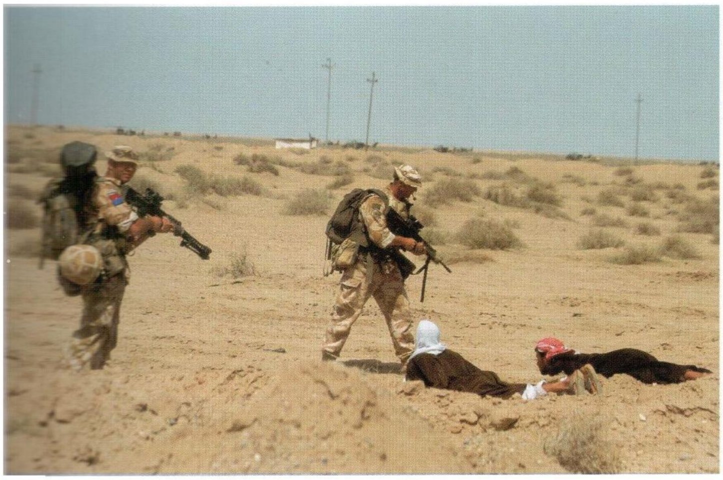
A British paratrooper stands watch in Al Rumaila. The green square on the sleeve of his desert camouflage uniform identifies him as belonging to the 3rd Parachute Battalion.

The fighting in Afghanistan revealed that the SA-80 assault rifle could malfunction when used in a dusty or sandy environment. For Operation "Telic," Her Majesty's infantry enjoyed a firepower that was reinforced by the acquisition of 600 FN Herstal MINIMI light machine guns and 600 Heckler & Koch AG-36 40mm grenade launchers.

"Red Devils" take up a position to guard the oil facilities at Al Rumaila. Each infantry squad of eight men received two MINIMI and two AG-36s, which were distributed to the support team of each group.

In the terrible heat of the desert at noon, a small group of exhausted paras defend an improvised defensive position. They are waiting for an Iraqi counterattack that they hope will not come.

One of the paras in the defensive position is manning a GPMG (General Purpose Machine Gun), a weapon that continues to prove its worth.



Two para-artillerymen stand watch over a pair of bedouins who were stopped in the oil fields. Sabotage of the oil wells and refineries was an obsessive fear of the coalition leaders.

These para-artillerymen of the 7th Regiment Royal Horse Artillery have abandoned their 105mm light gun to conduct patrols and take control of any suspicious people around the oil fields. Here they search a couple of bedouins.

US Marines on the Baghdad-Basra Highway

Coming from their departure point near Halabha in Kuwait, the 1st MEF (Marine Expeditionary Force) arrived at the Baghdad-Basra highway in the vicinity of Bab Salmett. Gathered under the full exposure of the noonday sun, 65,000 Marines under the command of 1st Marine Division were ready to be engaged. The convoy of thousands of vehicles turned northwest and rolled onto the royal highway. Baghdad was now 300 kilometers away.

At 1230 on 23 March, Marine vehicles of the 1st MEF emerge from the desert at Bab Salmett.

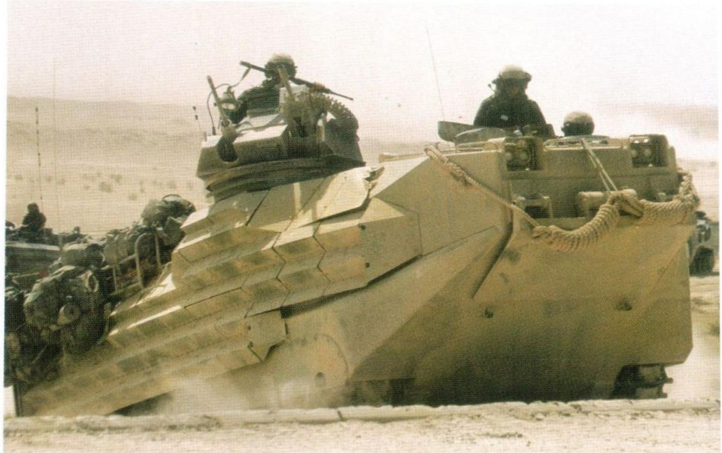
AAV-7A1 Amtrac of the 1st MEF climbs its way to the Baghdad-Basra highway at Bab Salmett.

A dozen Amtracs (Amphibious Tractors) and M-9 ACE (Armorec Combat Earth Mover) tractors muster around an AAVC-7A1, the command vehicle belonging to the HQ of 2/5 Marines.

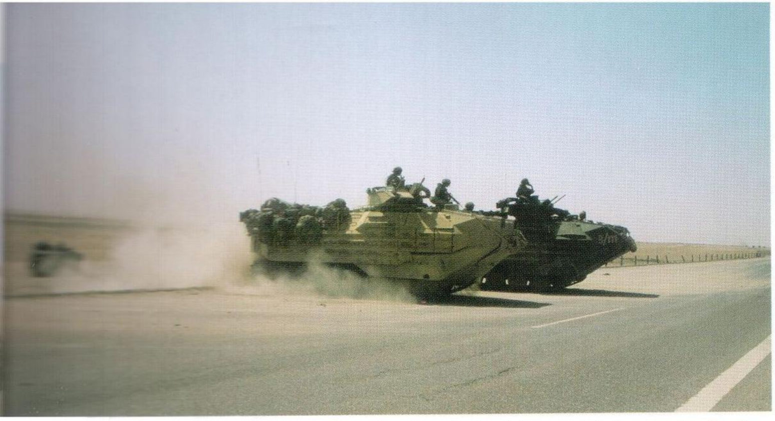
While using the Baghdad-Basra highway to hasten their advance toward Baghdad, the Marines hoped to avoid any confrontations in other major cities, if possible.

An impressive variety of vehicles belonging to the 1st MEF prepares to enter the Baghdad-Basra highway. The 1st MEF would use the highway as a natural penetration route to speed toward Baghdad.

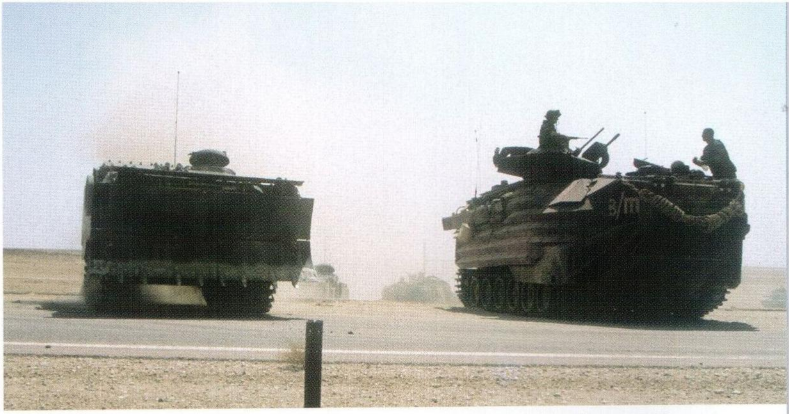
Marines in an AAV-7A1 show their joy at reaching the Baghdad-Basra highway. For the "leathernecks," the desert crossing is over, as well as the terrible jostling that characterized the daily life of the soldiers confined in the combat compartment of the Amtrac when it moves. Arriving undetected on the highway is the first step on the way to Baghdad.



The Marine Amtracs would stay on the highway until they reached the heart of Iraq. Note the paint scheme on this particular Amtrac. Some of the AAV-7A1s in the 1st Marine Division wore a sand-colored camouflage due to their use in California's Mojave Desert during hot-weather training. Amtracs of the MEU on the sea were painted in the traditional NATO three-color camouflage.

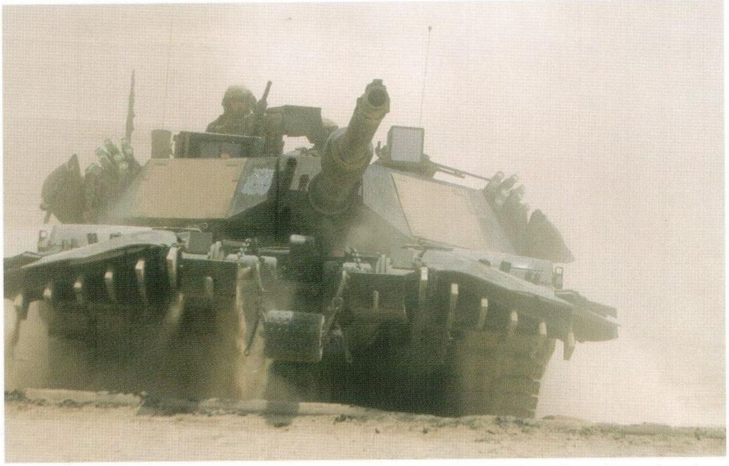


A pair of AAV-7A1s enter the Baghdad-Basra highway. Note the two different camouflage schemes of sand and NATO three-color.

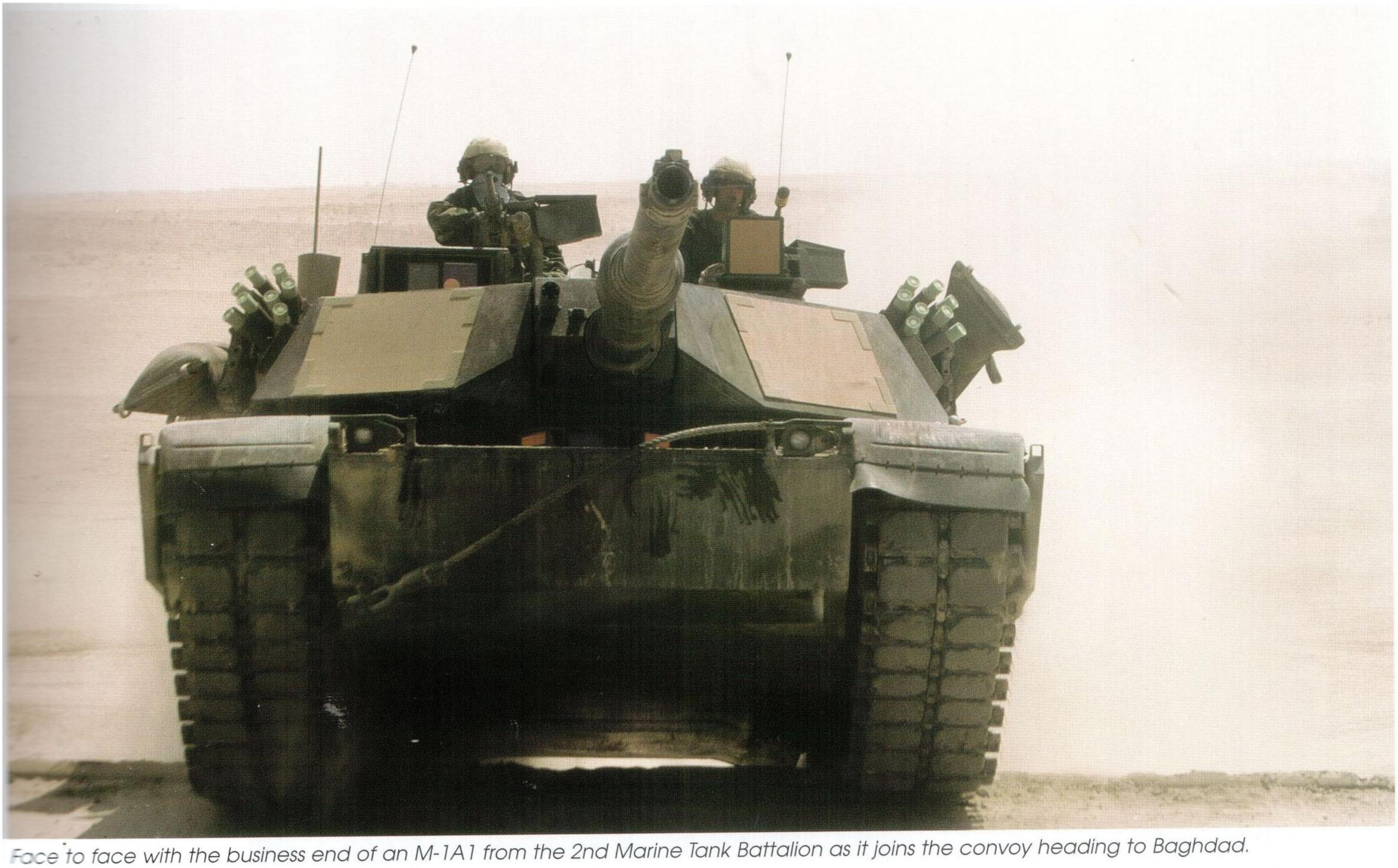


Marine combat engineers were also present in the MEF, as is shown by these two vehicles, an M-9 ACE and an AAV-7A1, that bear the tactical sign of the engineers. The engineer platoon attached to a combat group normally has three Amtracs and two armored engineer tractors.

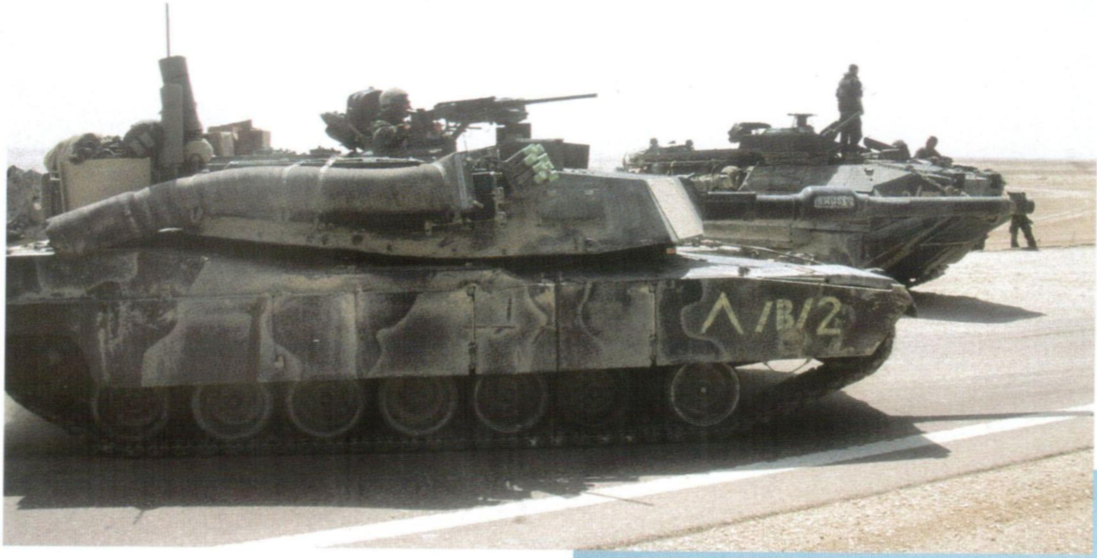
An M-1A1 Abrams main battle tank from the US Marines' 2nd Tank Battalion kicks up a cloud of dust as it moves onto the highway.



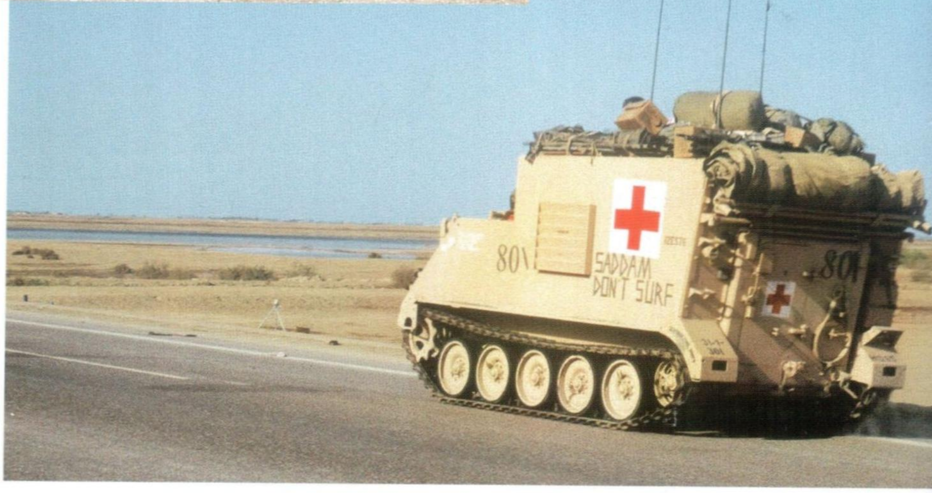
This USMC M-1A1 Abrams is fitted with a RAMTA mine-clearing plough. Note the bulldog insignia on the turret.



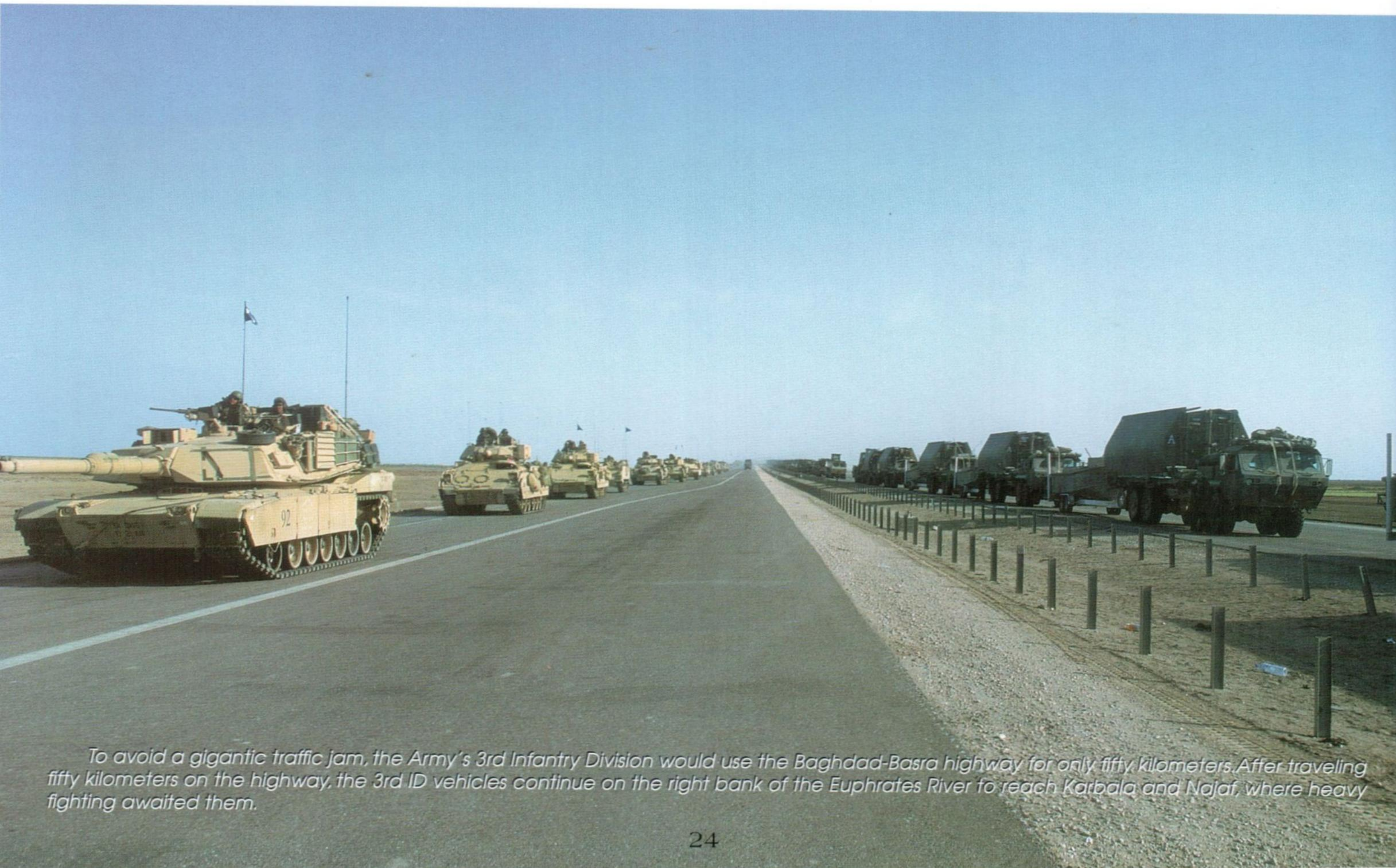
Face to face with the business end of an M-1A1 from the 2nd Marine Tank Battalion as it joins the convoy heading to Baghdad.



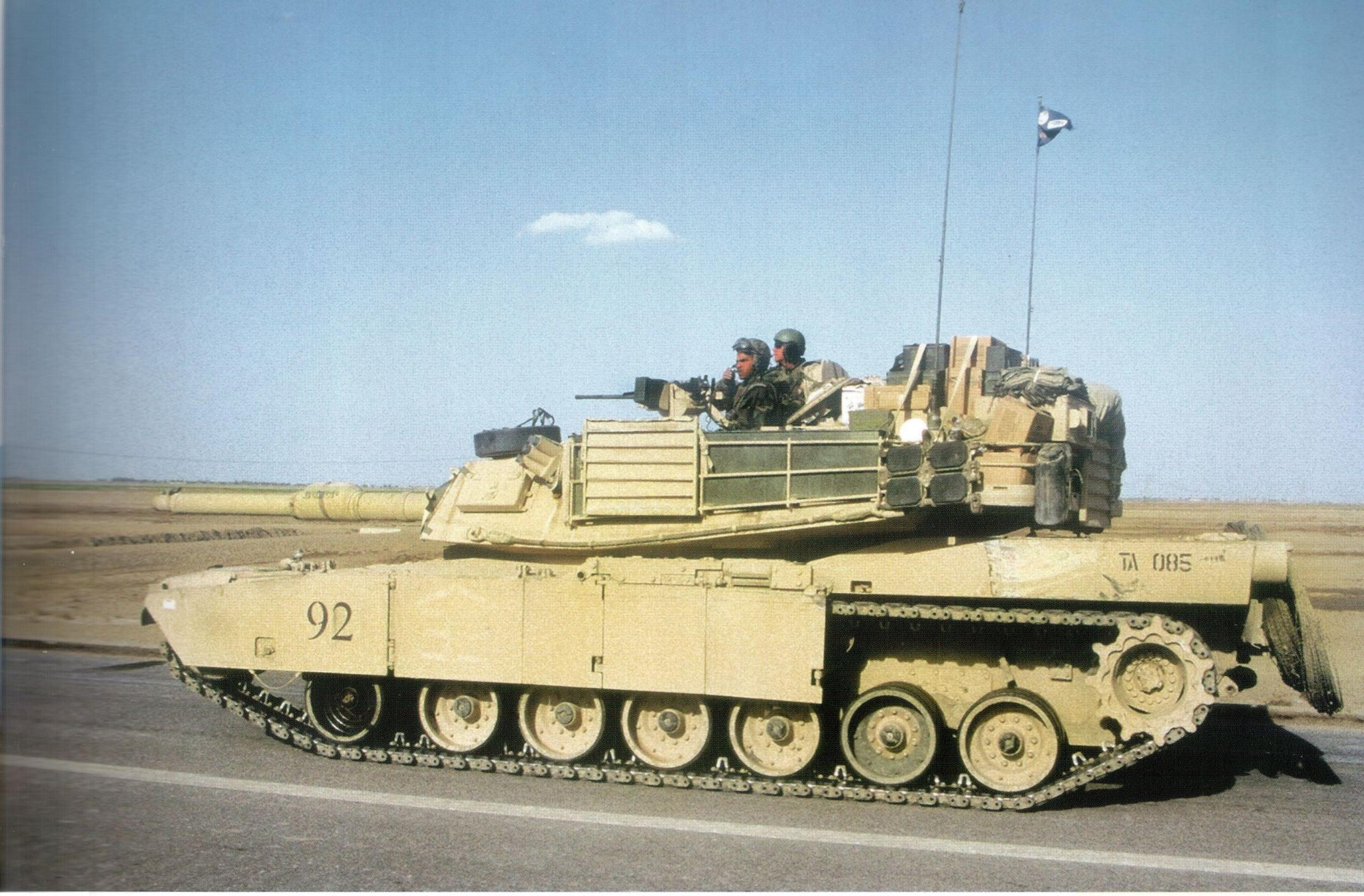
This profile view of an M-1A1 Abrams from the 1st MEF might give armor modelers some ideas on how to personalize a model of the MBT.



An M-577 ambulance from the 3rd ID enjoys a smooth drive on the road to Baghdad. Under the Red Cross insignia is a slur on Saddam Hussein's athletic prowess that appears to have been affixed with tape.



To avoid a gigantic traffic jam, the Army's 3rd Infantry Division would use the Baghdad-Basra highway for only fifty kilometers. After traveling fifty kilometers on the highway, the 3rd ID vehicles continue on the right bank of the Euphrates River to reach Karbala and Najaf, where heavy fighting awaited them.

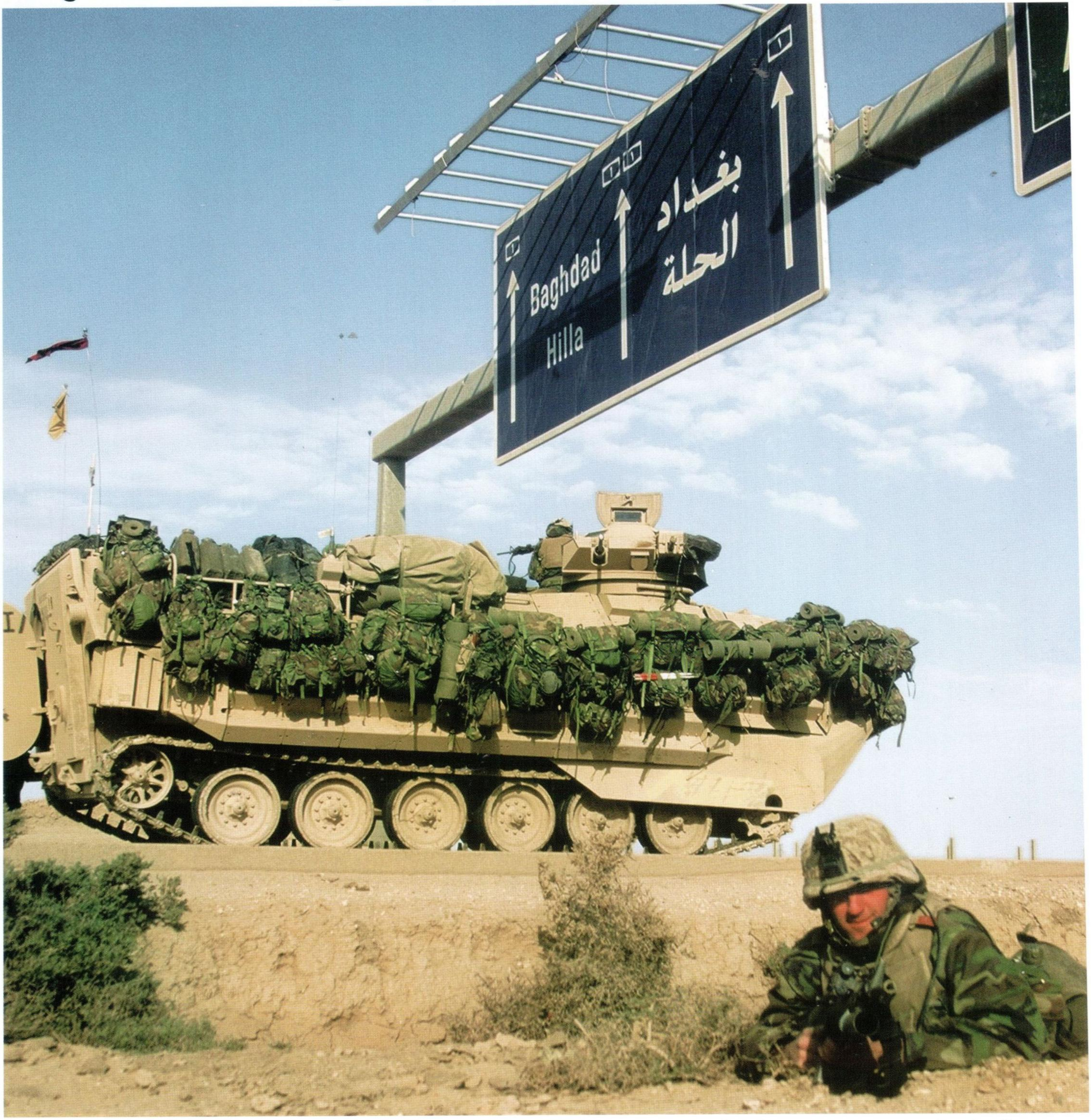


An M-1A1 Abrams from 1-30 Infantry of the 3rd Brigade, 3rd ID spends some time on the Baghdad-Basra highway.

Elements of the 1-30 INF came across the convoy of Marines and also made use of the highway. This Bradley infantry fighting vehicle is loaded for action.

A 3rd ID Bradley IFV leads a column of US Army armored vehicles stretching toward the dusty horizon. Traveling on the highway allowed both the 3rd Infantry Division and the Marine MEF to push toward Baghdad with noteworthy speed.

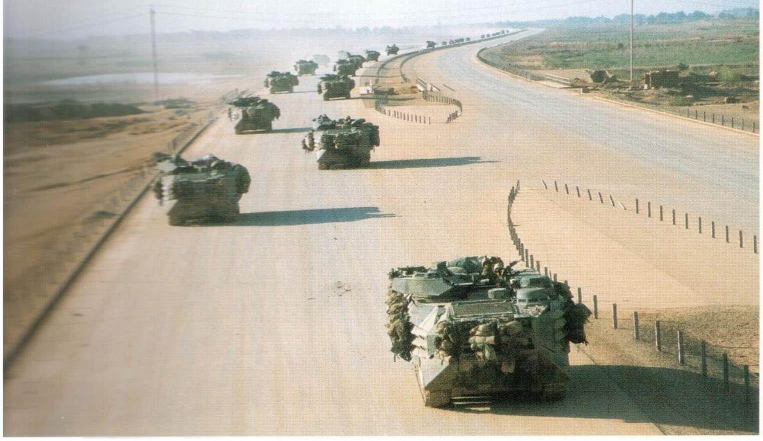
Baghdad-Basra Highway: 23 March, Afternoon



A Marine AAV-7A1 amphibious armored personnel carrier from the 1st MEF passes beneath a highway directory sign showing they are on the proper road to victory.

The military doctrine announced by the headquarters of General Tommy Franks in Qatar was clear: the coalition force in Iraq was to avoid urban centers and make a rush for the capital. The Baghdad-Basra highway, which was still under construction between Samawah and Diwaniyah, was the perfect way to get to Baghdad. The Iraqi engineer who designed the route was meticulous in his avoidance of built-up areas. This, of course, was advantageous to the Americans, who possessed unstoppable firepower in open terrain. Things were different once the highway passed near a city, and the US forces paid a heavy price to keep secret their itinerary, especially in the south.

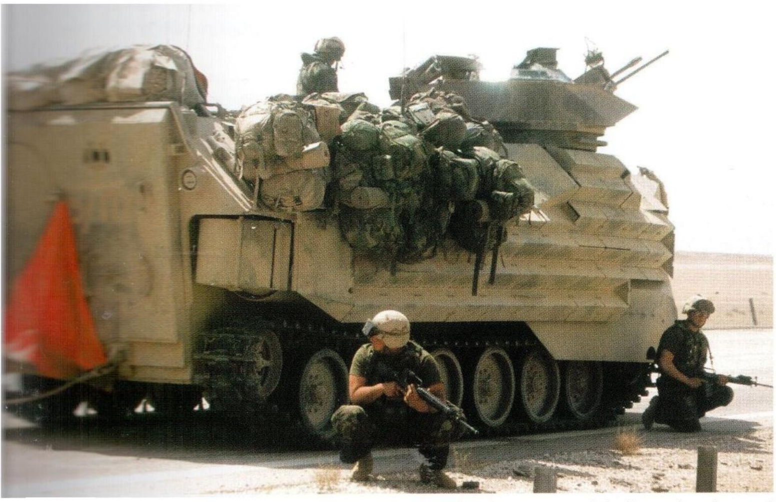
Lack of information prohibits us from getting a complete picture of the fighting in southern Iraq, but many sources report it as being bloody. A well-informed diplomat affirmed that US forces suffered many casualties in order to gain control of the southern part of Nasiriyah. Two AAV-7A1s were destroyed and around fifty medevac UH-60 flights were ordered. Farther north, the capture of certain parts of Karbala and Najaf, the holy Shi'ite cities, would not go well for the GIs of the 3rd Infantry Division, so the Marines were happy to be on the highway.



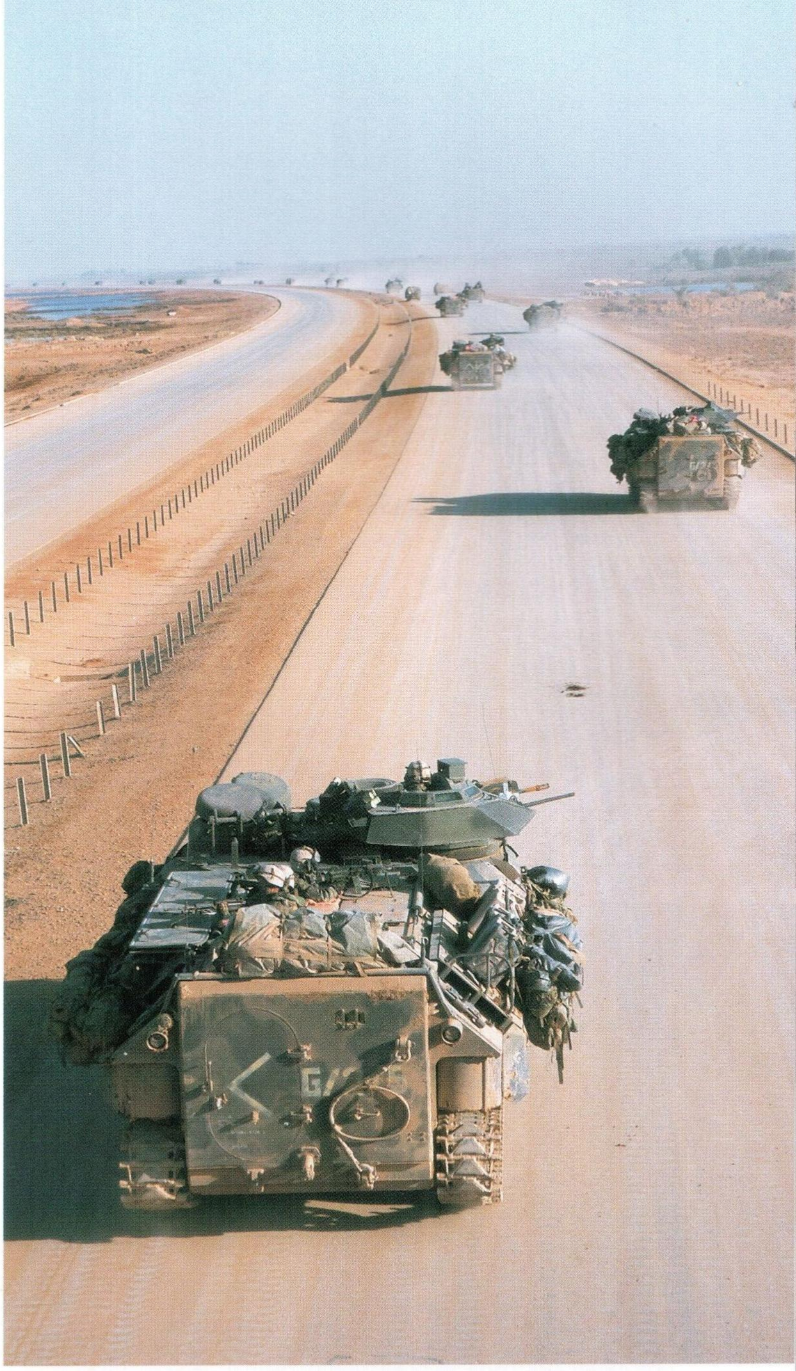
The Marines described it as the "largest convoy in modern US history." Looking just like a parade, hundreds of Amtracs and other vehicles belonging to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force roll toward Baghdad.

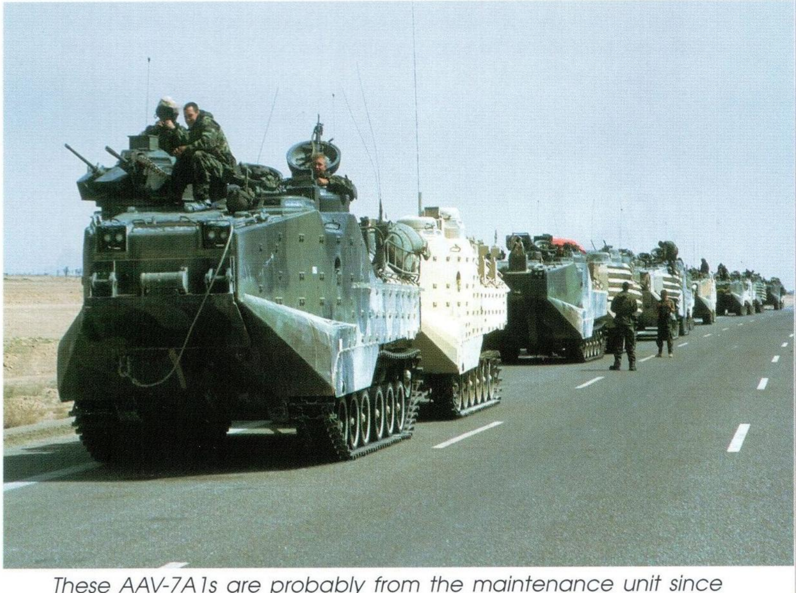
Far from the sea, amphibious Amtracs traverse the desert instead of waves. Happily, breakdowns were relatively rare during the advance on Baghdad and the mastodon of vehicles covered the many kilometers without major problems.

The AAV-7A1 made a good target, but few Iraqi missiles would be fired at the large amphibious APCs. The number of Amtracs damaged or destroyed during the campaign was ridiculously low compared to the number that were involved.

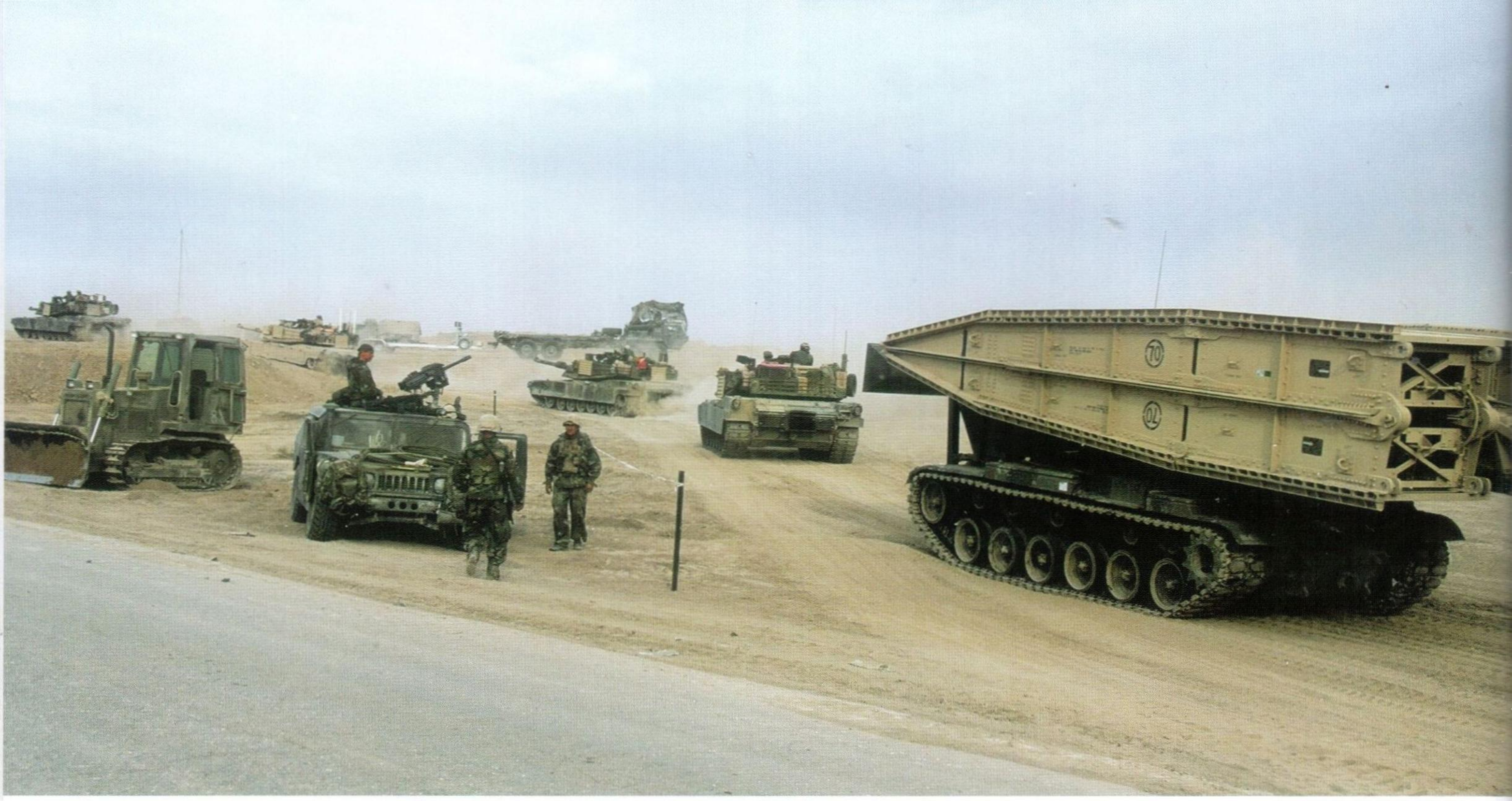


At each stop, the Marines on the Amtracs would disembark and take up defensive positions around the vehicle. The procedure is performed improperly here: the Marines are too close to the vehicle and have limited vision. If a rocket were to hit the amphibious APC, there is a good chance the Marines would be killed.

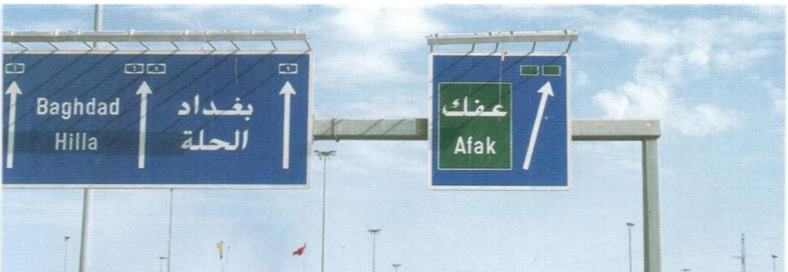




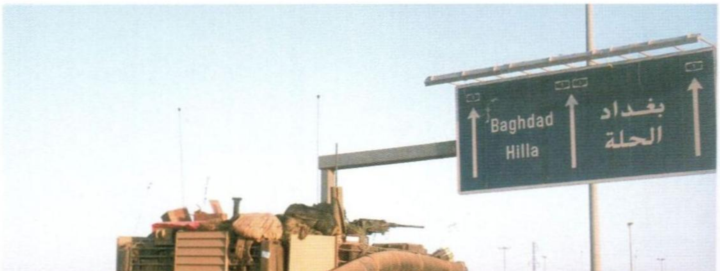
These AAV-7A1s are probably from the maintenance unit since they are not fitted with extra RAFAEL armor.



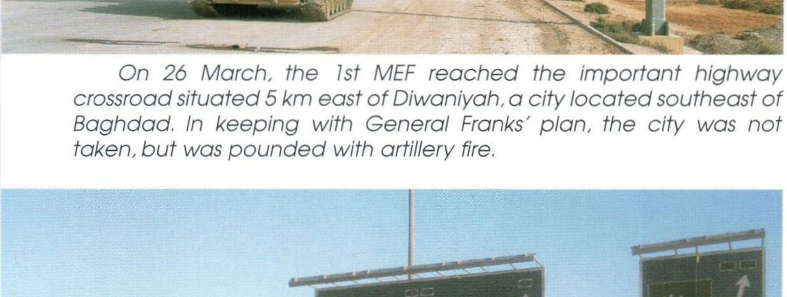
An impressive concentration of vehicles of the 1st MEF prepares to cross the Euphrates River. History is on the march. In all of world history, Baghdad had been captured only twice: once by Kublai Khan and the Mongols and once by Soliman the Magnificent.



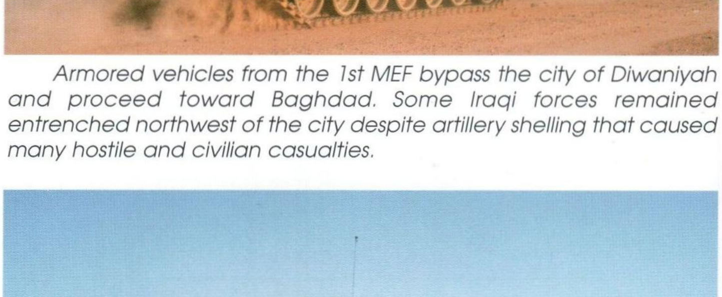
On 26 March, the 1st MEF reached the important highway crossroad situated 5 km east of Diwaniyah, a city located southeast of Baghdad. In keeping with General Franks' plan, the city was not taken, but was pounded with artillery fire.



Armored vehicles from the 1st MEF bypass the city of Diwaniyah and proceed toward Baghdad. Some Iraqi forces remained entrenched northwest of the city despite artillery shelling that caused many hostile and civilian casualties.



Iraqi forces fired shells and rockets at the Marine convoy near the crossroads shown here. A battery of USMC M-198 155mm howitzers immediately retaliated.



A TOW anti-tank platoon mingles with H Company (supply) of 2/5 Marines. The truck at right in the background is loaded with ammunition for M-1A1 tanks.

A platoon of MPs from the 1st Marine Division was in charge of coordinating the traffic and stopping "aliens" like me from going to the front line. Obviously the author overcame the MPs' efforts to thwart his journalistic mission or his photographs would not be in this book.

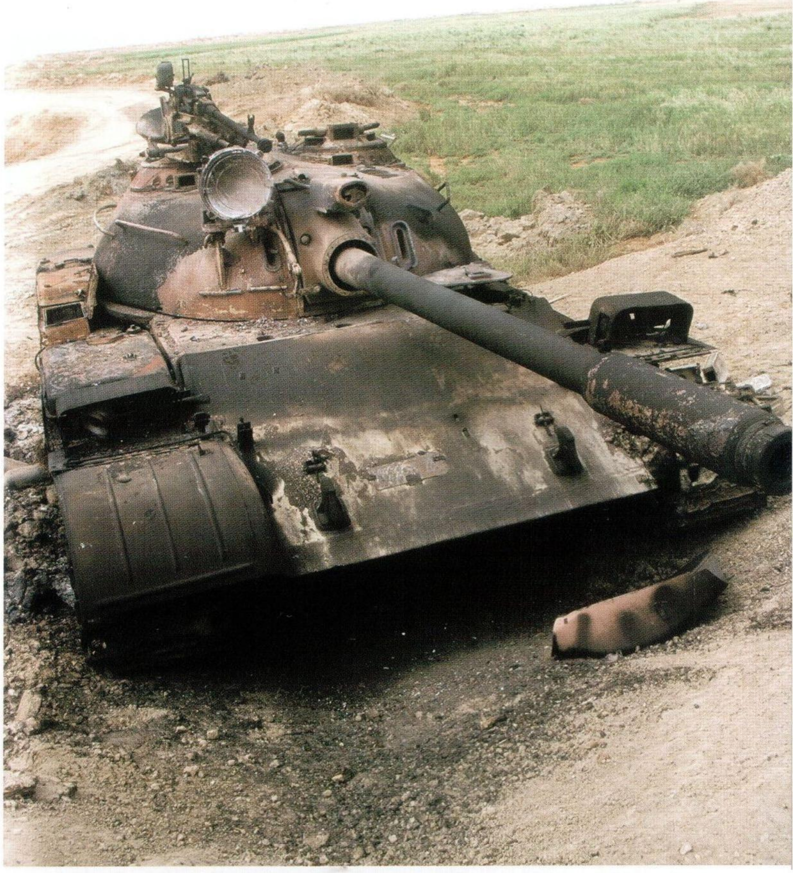
Baghdad
بغداد
الحلة
Afak

Marines from the 1st MEF provide a screen of protection for the column of vehicles passing by a crossroad on the Baghdad-Basra highway.

On the morning of 23 March, I stay in the area of Basra to take pictures of the "Desert Rats." The British soldiers are very polite, and though I was not an embedded journalist, they do not try to prevent me from working. In accordance with my original plan to go straight to Nasiriyah, I travel the Baghdad-Basra highway. At noon, I meet the entire 1st MEF coming out of the desert and turning northwest. They show me the direction to go and I decide to conduct my war along with the US Marines.

That evening I meet a small group of "wildcats" (non-embedded journalists), mainly photographers from France and Italy under contract to Newsweek and the New York Times. The members of this small group have probably seen more war and received more wounds than the US captain who prevented us from going further.

The following day I am alone, so I cross the Euphrates River in the middle of a terrific traffic jam. Iraqi aircraft were nowhere to be seen, but an old Stuka could have destroyed many of the vehicles. During the afternoon, I follow a LAV wheeled armored vehicle unit. Near an artillery battery, two MPs in a Humvee decorated with a boar's head signal me to stop my vehicle. I obey and get out of my car. When I walk toward an MP to ask if I can hold his M-16, he cocks his rifle and points it directly at my chest.



A destroyed T-55 clutters the desert on the outskirts of Diwaniyah. As often occurred during the fighting, the tank was abandoned by its crew without firing a shot and was later destroyed by a TOW launched from a Cobra helicopter.

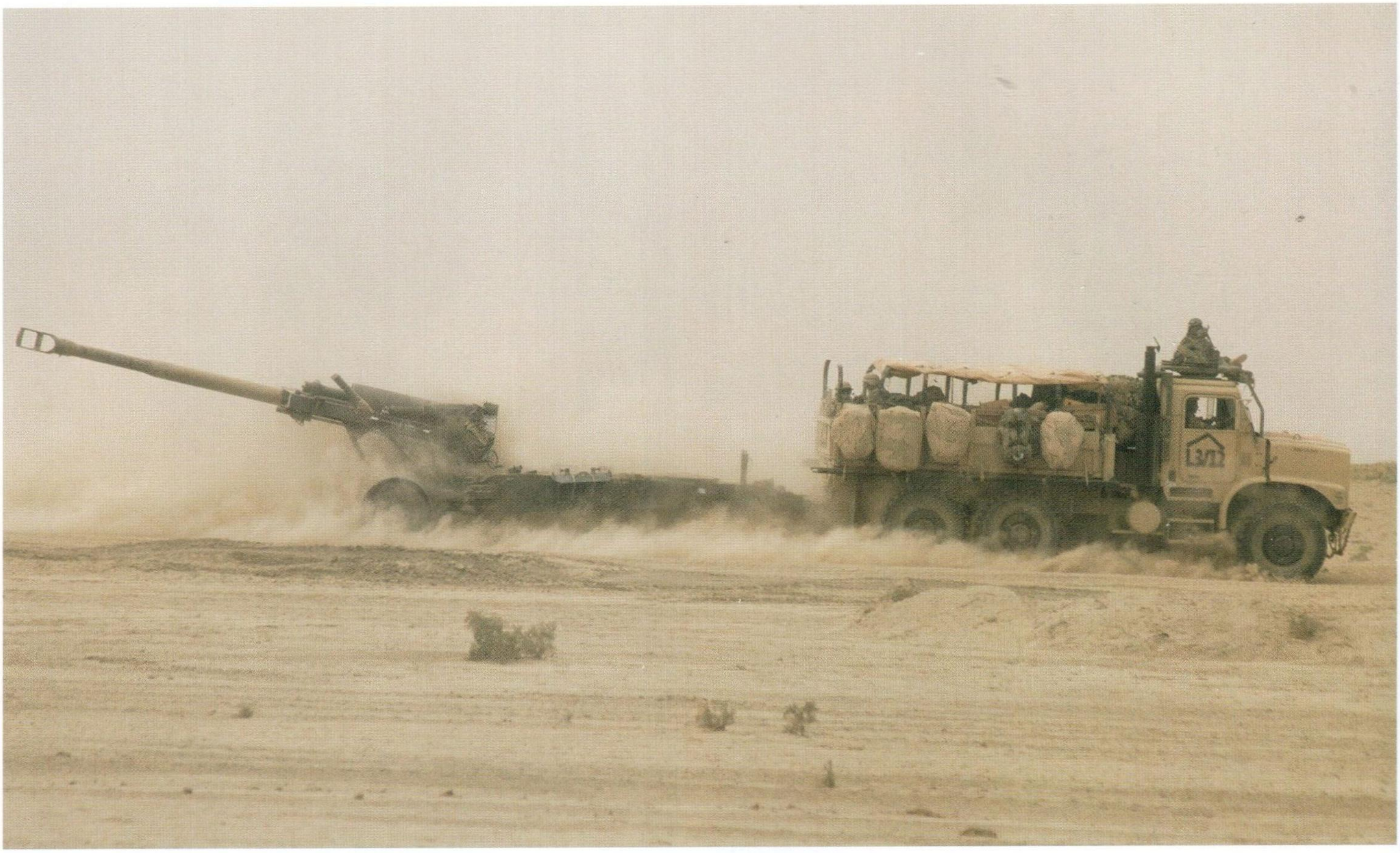
"Get back in your vehicle and turn around," the MP orders. Furious at his action because I had done nothing wrong, I reply,

"Sorry, but I have nothing to do with you and I do not accept your order. If you want to shoot, do it, but that will cause you a lot of problems."

It is a standoff. When a major comes up and asks me to please return to my car, I comply. Because the MPs maintain their aggressive attitude, I decide to "play with their heads" a little. I start and stop my engine over and over so they have to continue to focus their attention on me. Then I read a book for a while.

Later I decide to turn around and skirt the column. The problem is that the country is flat and so it is hard to hide. I take a dirt road that runs parallel to the highway, but the MPs see me immediately and try to block my car with their Humvee. I see and work on a crossword puzzle as the MPs stand three paces from me with their M-16s pointed right at me. After half an hour, an ammunition convoy arrives and finds themselves blocked from continuing on by the Humvee and my red car. An argument ensues between the MP and the artillerymen about the congestion, but after a few minutes the courteous major returns and requests that I return to the main road until the Humvee disappears. I again comply with his request.

I must have misunderstood the major, though. I thought I could proceed once I could not see the Humvee, but I guess he meant I should stay put for a couple of hours. After half an hour, the Humvee leaves and I start my engine. Five kilometers away, I suddenly see the two MPs running toward me, Berettas in their hands. Some other men are with them, and soon six furious MPs surround me and aim their guns at me. This time I decide to make a tactical withdrawal, pretty sure I've overstayed my welcome. I spend the night with an artillery battery that opens fire at 2355.



The Marine artillery continued to pound the enemy throughout the sandstorm.

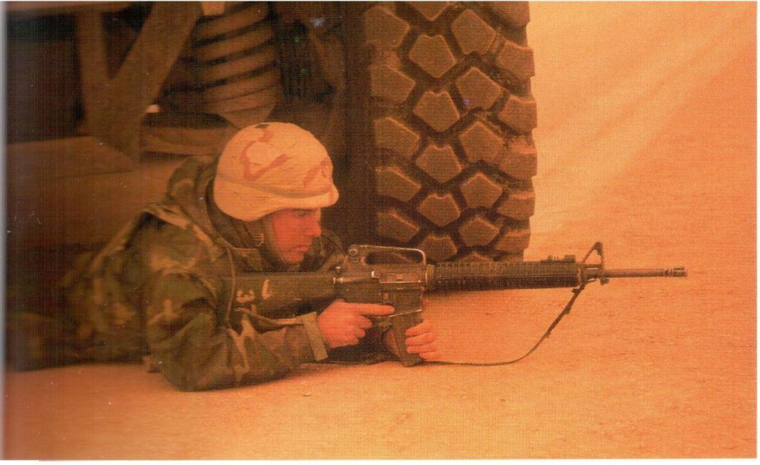
On 24 March, a terrible sandstorm kicked up. For the next three days, huge sandstorms spread across Iraq and down into the Gulf, playing havoc with the US forces' push toward Baghdad. Central and southern Iraq was ravaged by high winds that engulfed the US troops with huge, debilitating clouds of sand. Nevertheless, the 1st MEF musters for an attack fifty kilometers south of Diwaniyah. Two batteries of 155mm guns go into position in the heavy winds. On the main highway, four platoons of M-1s (16 tanks) and 30 AAV-7s take their place around 1841. At 2355, the M-198s fired approximately 50 shells.

On 25 March at 0600, the 1st MEF began its advance again. But hour by hour, visibility decreased. The gray sky became yellow, then later dark orange. Due to the lack of visibility, some vehicles in the convoy stopped. Curiously, the guns kept firing. At noon, the visibility did not exceed three meters. At 1440, all troop movement was cancelled. Sporadic rain mixed with 150 km/h (93mph) winds.

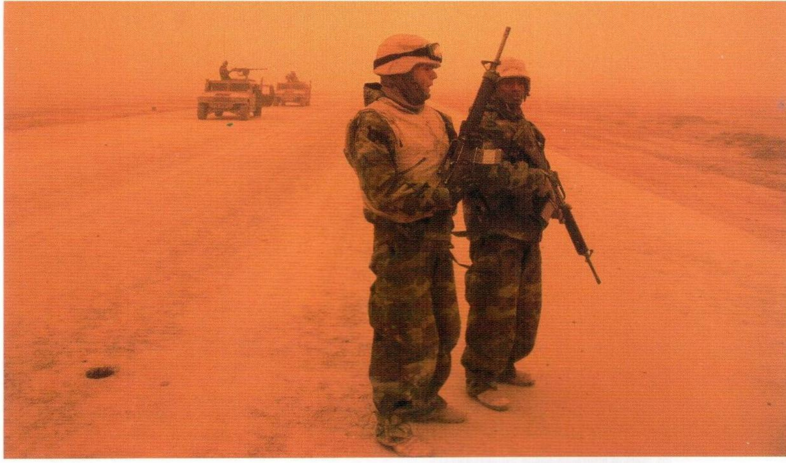
During the night, only the artillery continued to fire, perhaps to prevent Iraqi infiltration. On 26 March, the situation remained stationary. Nights were very cold, but the Marines had no choice but to wait.

"Leathernecks" from the 3/5 Marines unload ammunition crates from an Amtrac during the sandstorm. The 1st MEF tried to proceed up the highway on the 24th, but on the 25th all operations were suspended due to the anger of nature and some Iraqi resistance.

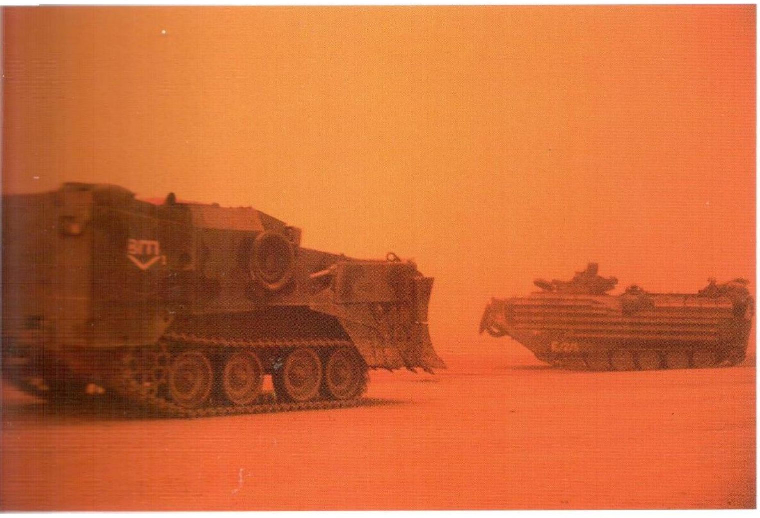
During a halt, a Marine assumes a close-protection position at the rear of a Humvee convoy. His M-16 assault rifle would most likely become jammed from the sand after the first burst.



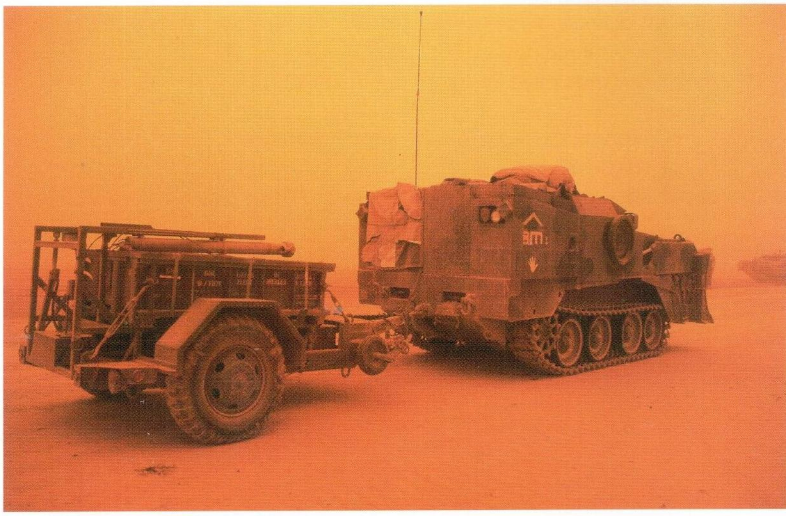
Weariness can be seen on the face of this Marine, who has taken a defensive position under a truck. Wary of an attempted suicide attack, the US troops surrounded their vehicles during each halt. The sandstorm turned an already stressful situation into a nightmare.



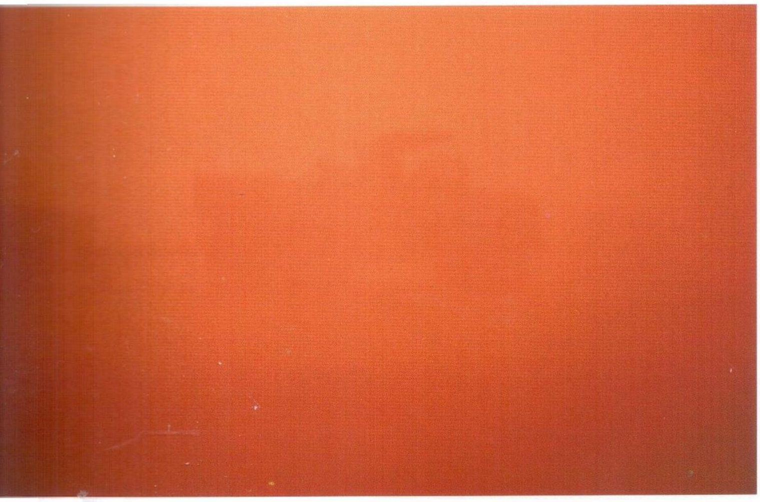
My "friends" the MPs. These particular military policemen were nice, but that was not often the case.



A Combat Engineer M-9 ACE tractor and an AAV-7A1 belonging to the 2/5 Marines. On 24 and 25 March, all movement was slowed down by a terrible sandstorm.



The MICLIC (Mine Clearing Line Charge), which is being towed here by an M-9 ACE tractor, is used to create a breach in a minefield. The orange color in this set of photos are natural results of the sandstorm.



There is not much to see in this photograph. However, this is an accurate picture of what an Iraqi desert sandstorm looks like, and it is described by the Arabic word kashim as "the wind that makes you crazy." The subject of this photo, a truck, was situated only 10 meters from the author/photographer's position.

The Marine artillery was kept active during the sandstorm, no doubt to prevent Iraqi forces from taking advantage of the inclement weather to conduct infiltration operations.

Despite the difficulties it creates, the sandstorm is a blessing from Heaven for me; I use it to infiltrate the advanced forces. The MPs are kept busy protecting themselves so they do not notice me. The wind and sand force me to stop in the afternoon of the 25th. At 1600, I can't see 10 meters. I need a flashlight to write in my diary.

The night of the 25th is terrible. I am trapped in my car and try to sleep while the rain, wind and sand combine to spray mud everywhere.

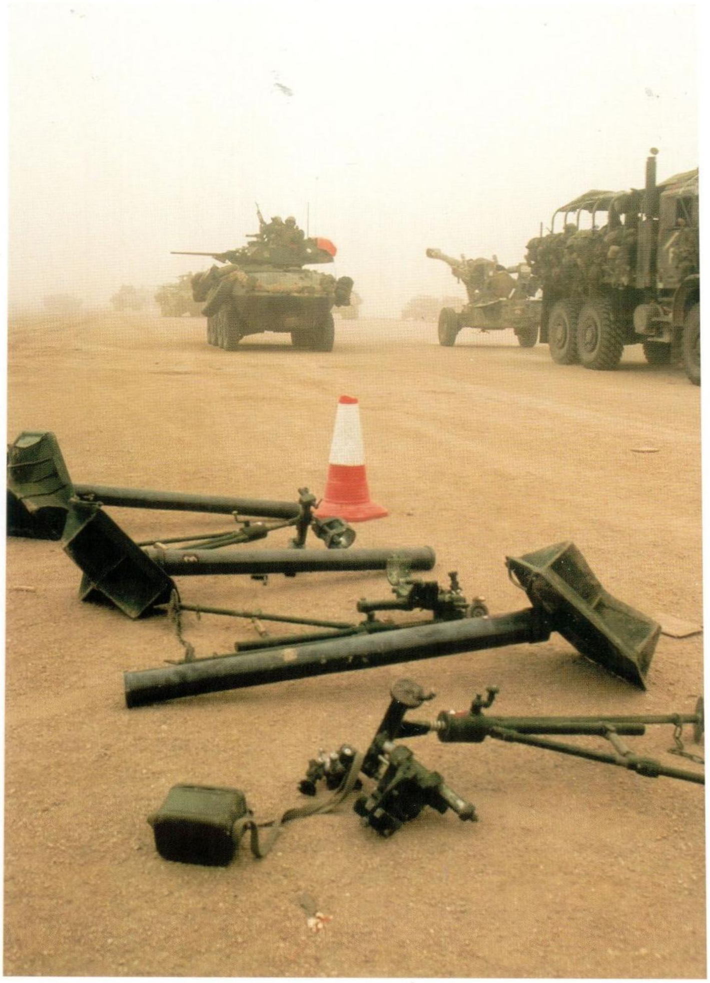
Resistance

During the sandstorm, which limited all activity of the coalition forces, the 1st MEF heading north encountered weak Iraqi slow-down action.

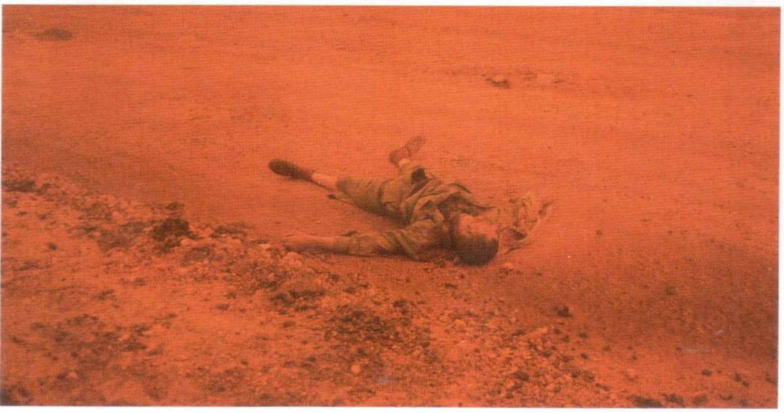
On 25 March at 0600, a Humvee TOW platoon engaged a few militiamen supported by some regular army engineers. The engineers had no time or desire to create serious obstacles for the US troops. In the Marine sector, the "mine war" that was anticipated never took place. American engineers were mostly asked to destroy their own unexploded sub-munitions or those belonging to the US Air Force.

A pick-up truck armed with a 14.5mm gun was found abandoned in the middle of a bunch of helmets and gas masks that were scattered around. In the distance lay a body. Artillery is still flashing in a dark orange sky. A first sergeant told me that 30 Iraqi bodies were on the roadside ahead waiting to be buried. Some captured 81mm guns were collected by an LAV platoon. Further away I passed by an abandoned 120mm mortar position. Ammunition crates with "Royal Jordanian Army" marked on their sides were piled beside an old destroyed truck.

Of course, the modest Iraqi resistance was no match for the firepower of the 1st MEF as it advanced toward Baghdad. "Where is Saddam's army?" the Marines wondered.



On the night of 25-26 March, the Marines met some Iraq resistance and endured several mortar rounds. These attacks were more than adequately counterbalanced by impressive Marine artillery fire. The LAV took care of the last of the resistance. Here a captured mortar lies dismantled on the side of a road being watchea by an LAV.



This young Iraqi soldier sacrificed himself in a desperate attempt to slow the advance of the American forces.

Leathernecks and GIs

The typical Marine and his Army colleague, the GI, involved in Operation "Iraqi Freedom" are young men not much more than teenagers. Their average age is between 18 and 21. They are convinced of their superiority and the good cause in waging the war. During basic training, their drill instructors told them they were "slugs" before enlisting, but that they are now the best soldiers in the world with the best equipment in the world. Often coming from the lower classes of American society, they have not traveled far from their own homes and have not experienced much of life. Nevertheless, they believe in their mission and are sure that Iraq had something to do with the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2000 and are partially motivated by a spirit of revenge. But their officers will not allow them to fire blindly from inside their Amtracs and Bradleys.

Air superiority enabled the coalition forces to advance at an unexpectedly quick pace. But the reality of war may be hard for the young men to take. As they become more and more involved in the fighting, the admirable young men rapidly mature. Some may become disillusioned and leave the army, but those who stay in will become true Marines and soldiers.

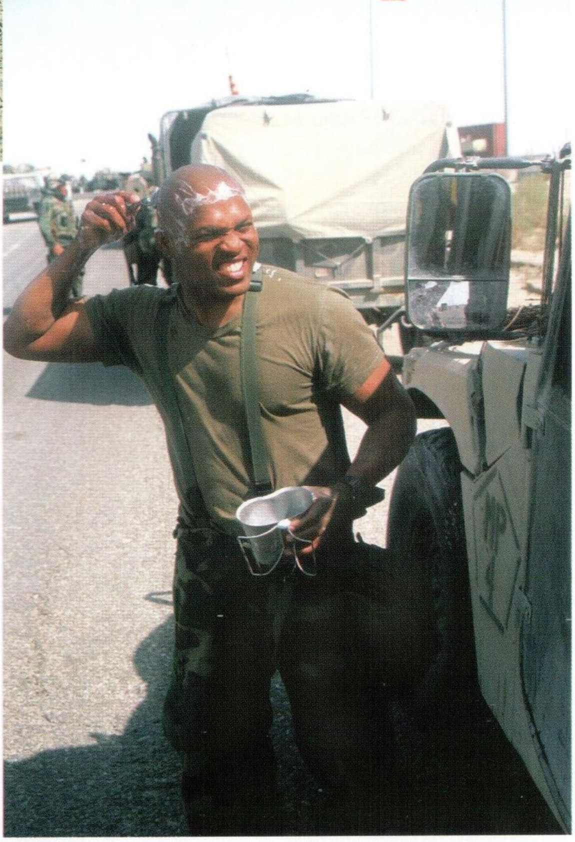
These Marines are friends for better or worse. The 60mm mortar battery is ready to put their tubes in battery before nightfall.

"Leathernecks" of the 3/5 Marines clean their M-16s following a sandstorm. Good comradeship and team spirit bind the men together. Like all soldiers in all wars, they must adjust to combat after initial illusions disappear and some of their friends are killed.

Note that the Marines wear camouflaged uniforms designed for temperate regions, not the desert. Nights can be very cold in the desert.

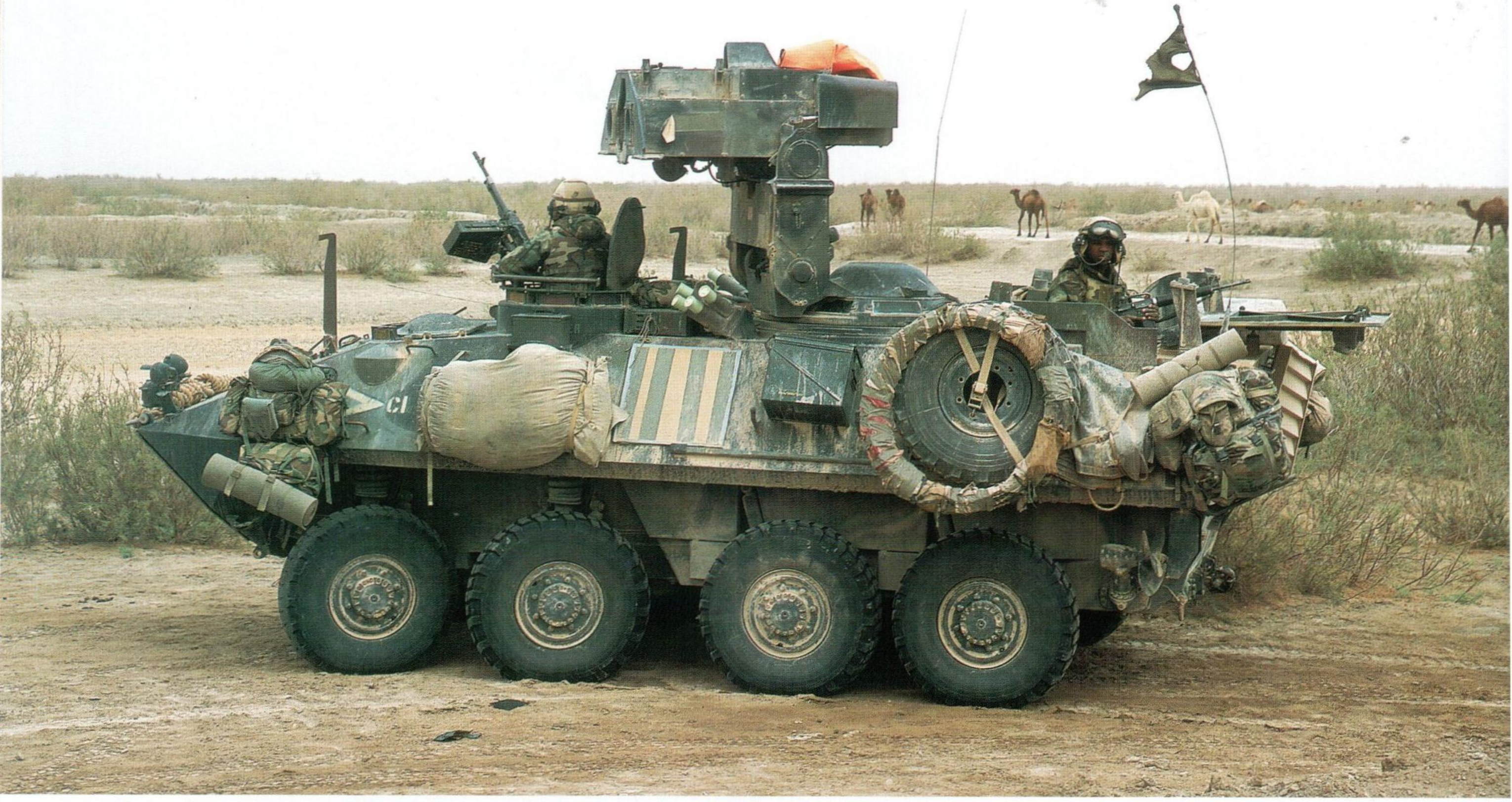
"Teamwork." Marines of the HQ Battalion roll up the giant camouflage net that covered the four trucks of the MEF's command post.

"Campaign Life." Throughout my trip in Iraq, I had problems with MPs and staff officers, but never with the troops. They readily accepted me, even though I was a French journalist. This picture of several Marines who invited me to share the warmth of their small fire is dedicated to my Marine friends.



The USMC is an organization that takes its traditions seriously. In the middle of the desert, a Marine sacrifices some of his precious water to shave his head in order to maintain a good Marine look.

LAV Battalion



The anti-tank version of the LAV, the LAV-AT, is fitted with a two-tube launcher with two ready-to-fire TOW missiles. Fourteen missiles are kept in reserve.

For the Marine Corps, the men who could best be described as the "hussars of the 21st century" would be the Light Armored Recon Battalion, who are always at the forefront of the column with their LAV eight-wheeled armored vehicles. Conceived at the end of the Cold War as the Light Attack Infantry (LAI) for new types of conflicts called "low intensity," the LAV units were normally formed to land from LCAC hovercrafts to conduct fast and deep penetration behind enemy lines. When facing a classic army, such as the Iraqis, the Light Armored Battalions are engaged at the head or on the flank of the MEF advancing on Baghdad.

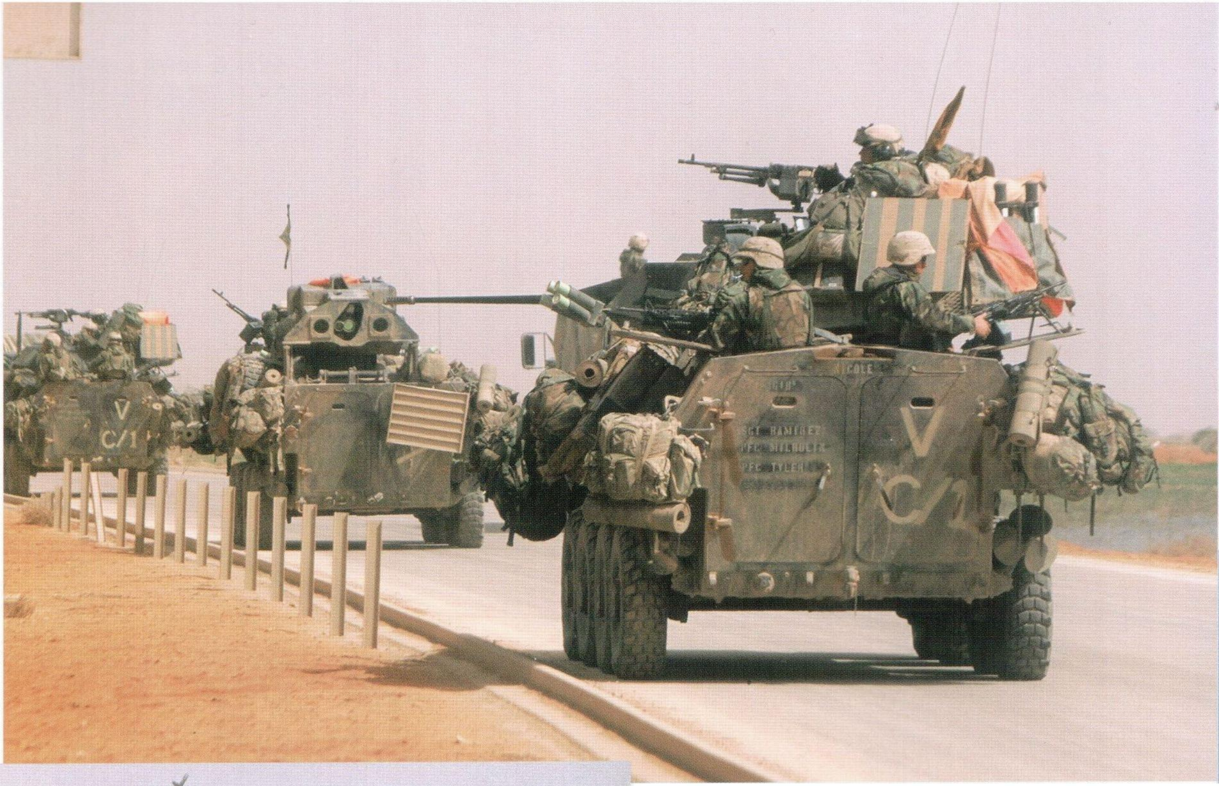
When the Marines abandoned the highway near Al Daghara to turn northeast in order to cross the Tigris River, one of the two penetration points (the southern one) was totally occupied by the LAV.

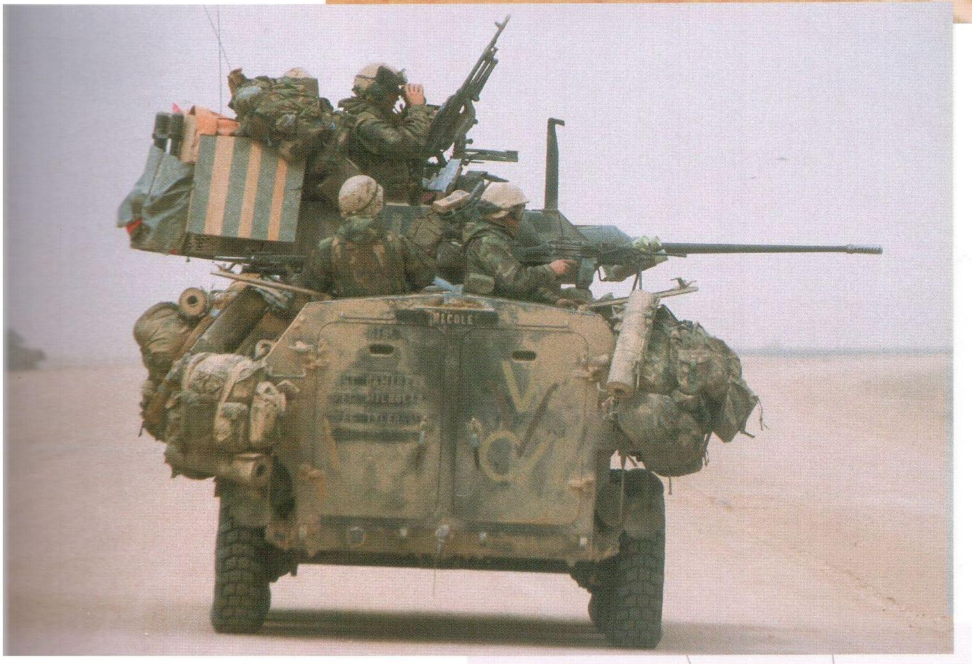
Each Marine division has a LAV battalion (1st, 2nd, 3rd Light Armored Recon Battalion), and all of them were present during the Iraqi campaign, often unified into a large reconnaissance force. All types of LAV vehicles were represented, as seen in the following pictures.

An Iraqi shell explodes in the distance as elements of a Light Armored Recon Battalion look on.

A LAV-25 of the 1st Light Armored Recon Battalion loaded down with troops and equipment heads toward Baghdad.

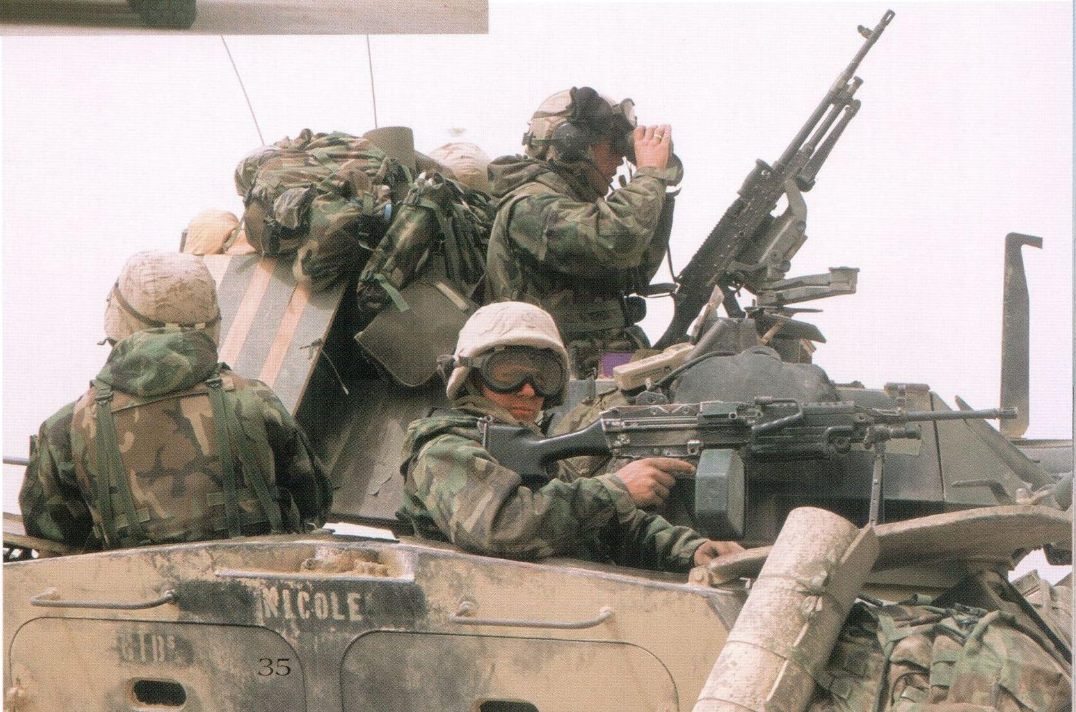
It can be very dangerous to follow the LAVs because they are the spearhead of the MEF and can withdraw suddenly if they meet strong resistance.



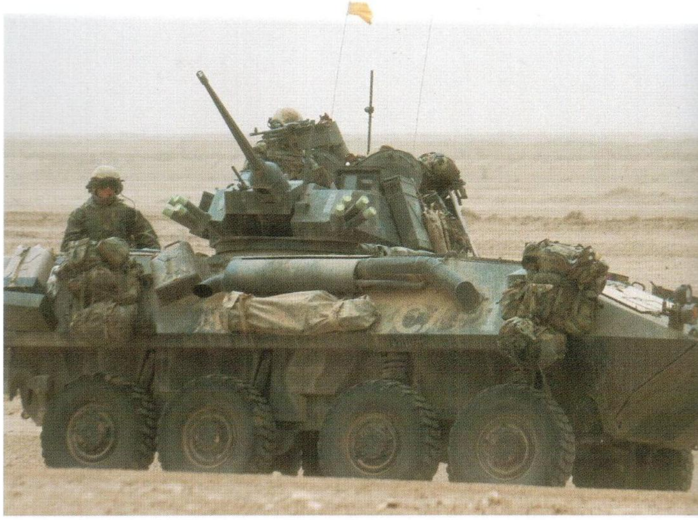


With its turret in the 3 o'clock position, a LAV-25 of the 1st Light Armored Recon Battalion advances through the dust along the Baghdad-Basra highway south of Diwaniyah.

It seems that the troops in every mechanized fighting unit in every army in the world put the names of their wives and sweethearts back home somewhere on their vehicles. This LAV-25 is named "Nicole." Note the wire cutter at the far right of the photograph. The crew of the LAV-25 usually consists of three crewmen plus six soldiers, but that number is reduced to four in many cases.

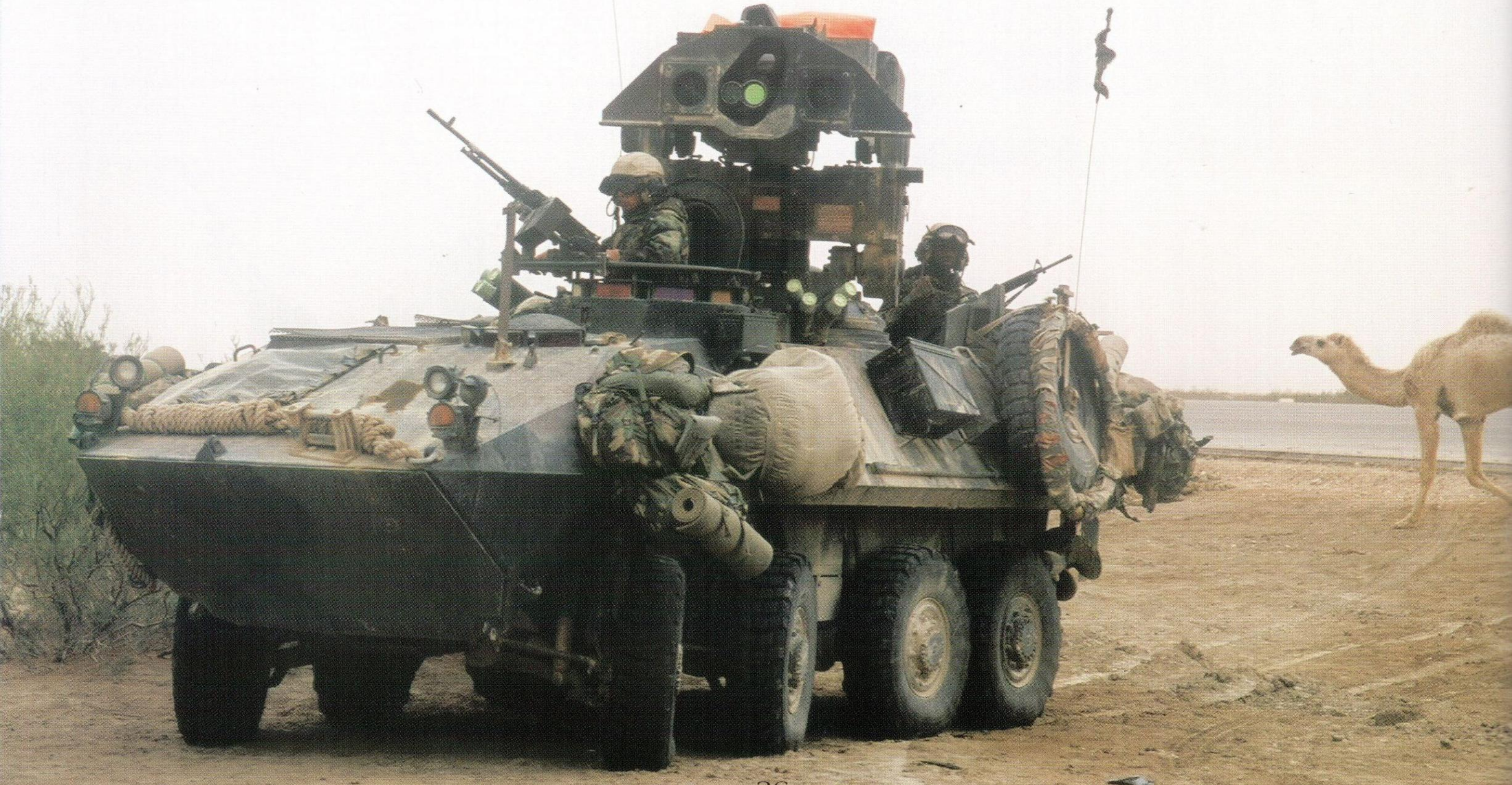


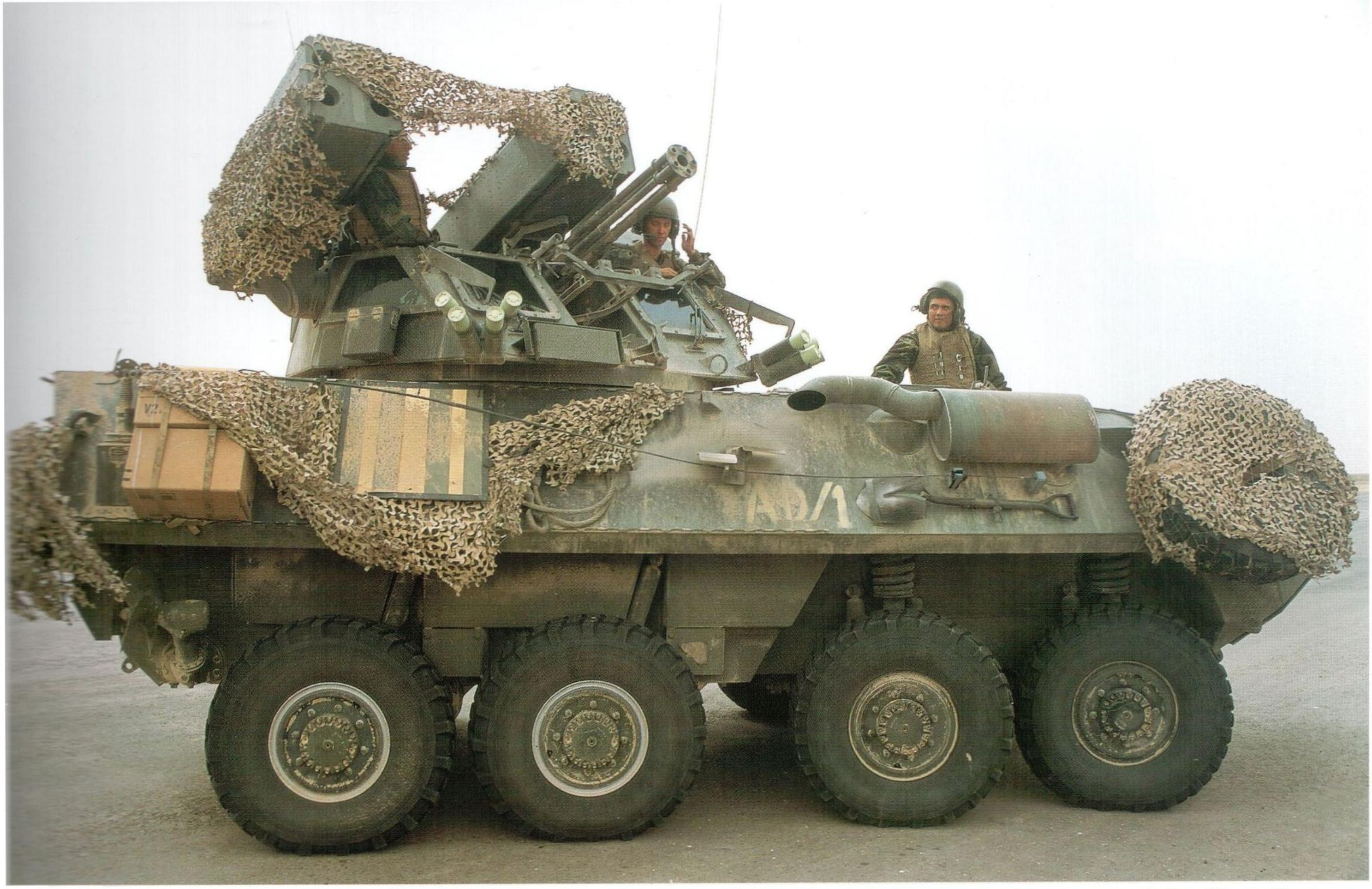
A Marine keeps a sharp lookout as he protects his LAV. His position is at the proper distance from the vehicle.



This is an example of the basic infantry version of the LAV-25. This one, which is protecting the flank of the MEF, is painted in the three-tone NATO camouflage scheme covered with a heavy coat of dust.

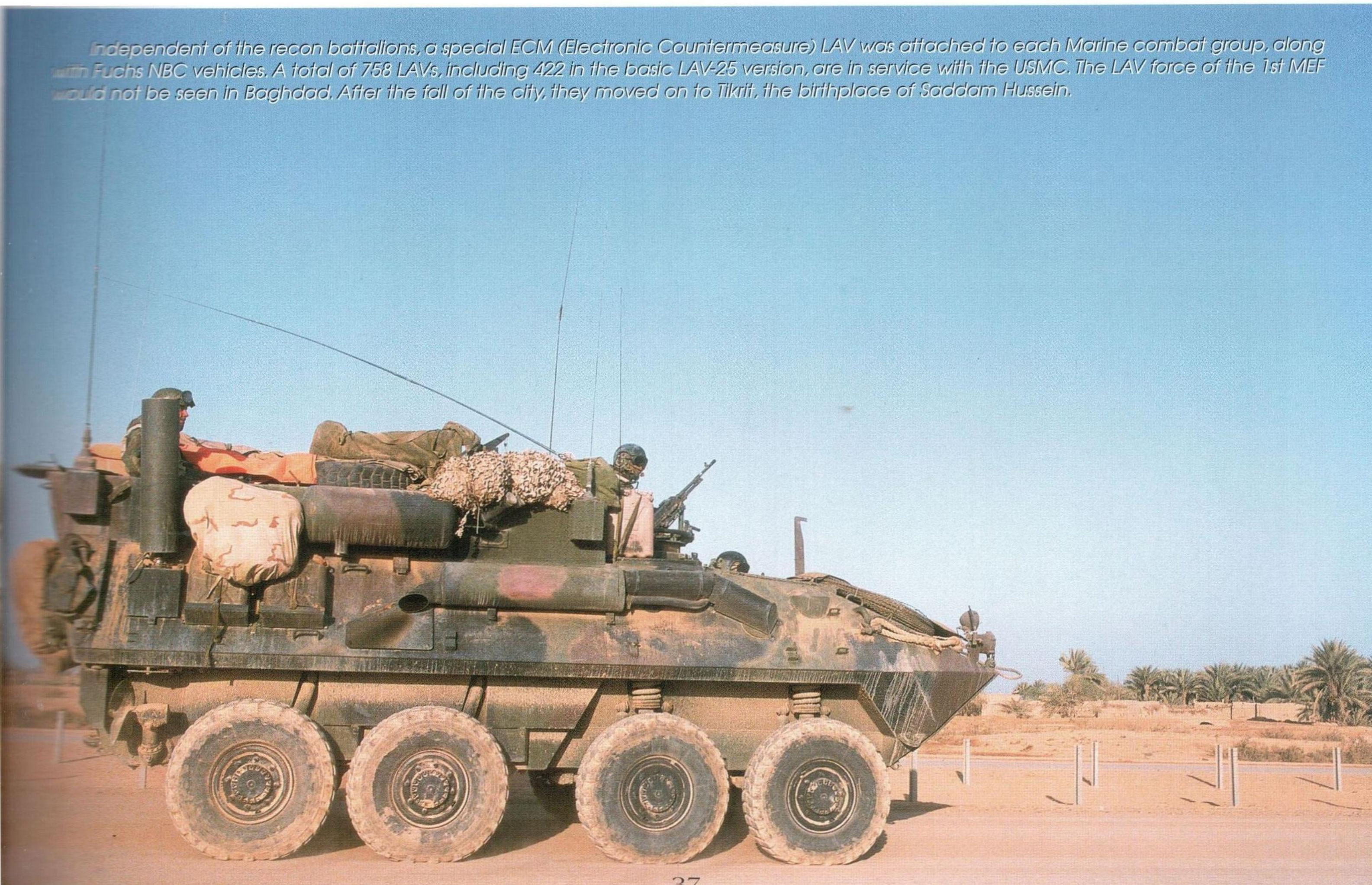
With its Raytheon turret, an LAV-AT can destroy an enemy tank at 3700 meters with TOW missiles. Since the Iraqi tanks had already been abandoned or destroyed by aircraft prior to the arrival in Baghdad, the LAV-ATs often used their missiles against concrete structures or homes where Fedayeen (Saddam Hussein's civilian loyalists) forces were entrenched.



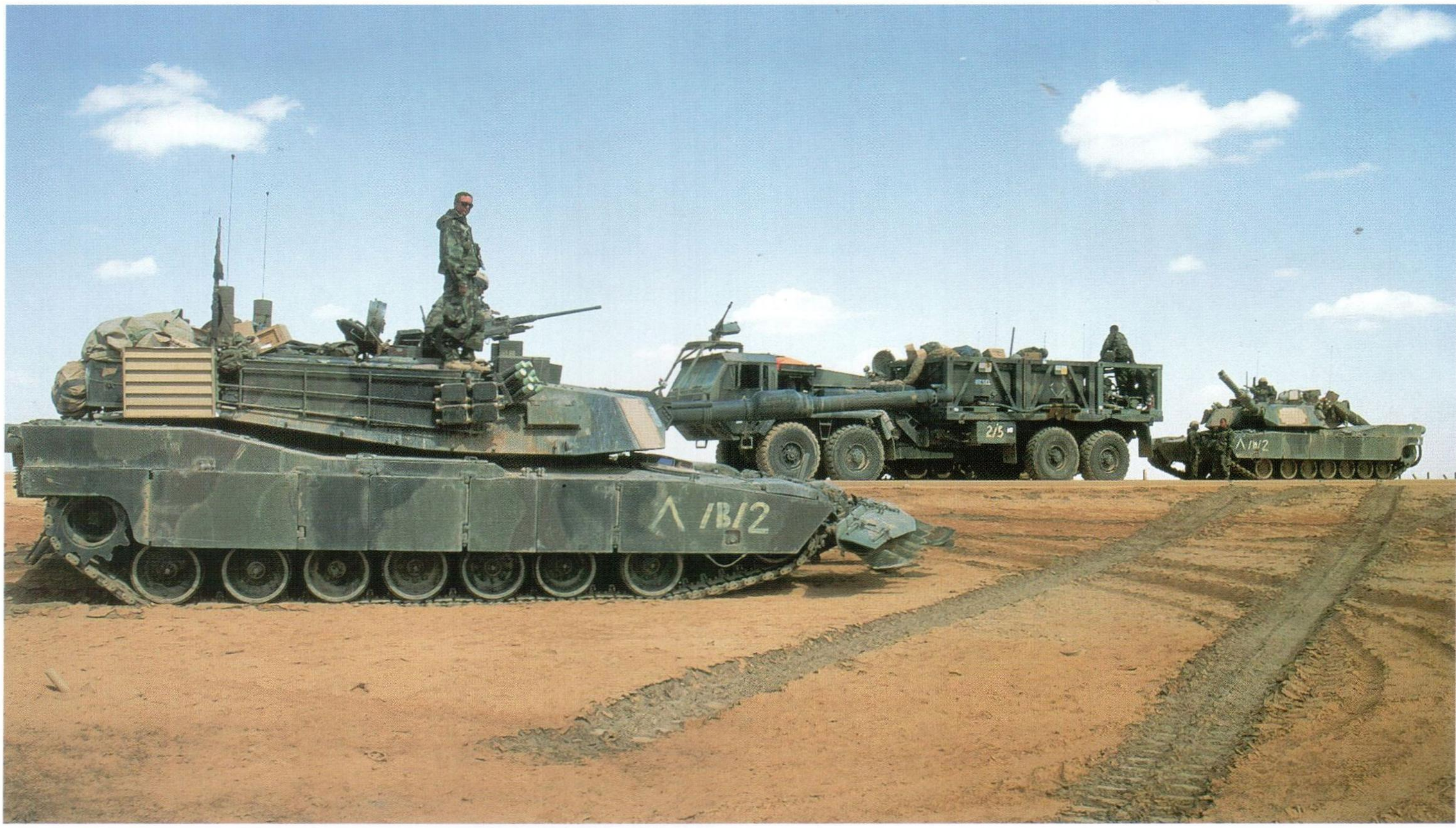


The latest version of the LAV is the LAV-AD (air defense), which entered duty only a year ago. The turret features a rotating 25mm Blazer gun and eight Stinger rockets. Due to the lack of air opposition, they were only used against ground targets.

Independent of the recon battalions, a special ECM (Electronic Countermeasure) LAV was attached to each Marine combat group, along with Fuchs NBC vehicles. A total of 758 LAVs, including 422 in the basic LAV-25 version, are in service with the USMC. The LAV force of the 1st MEF would not be seen in Baghdad. After the fall of the city, they moved on to Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein.

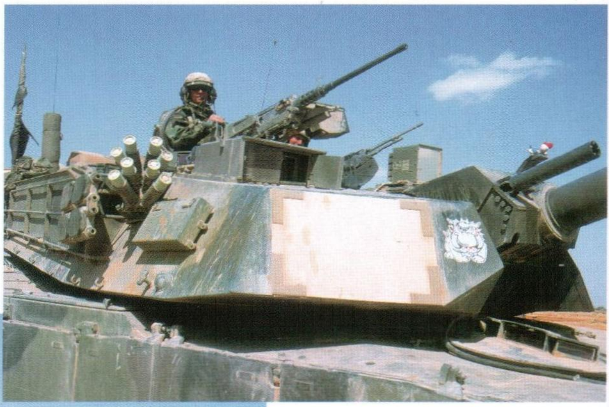


Abrams and Amtracs

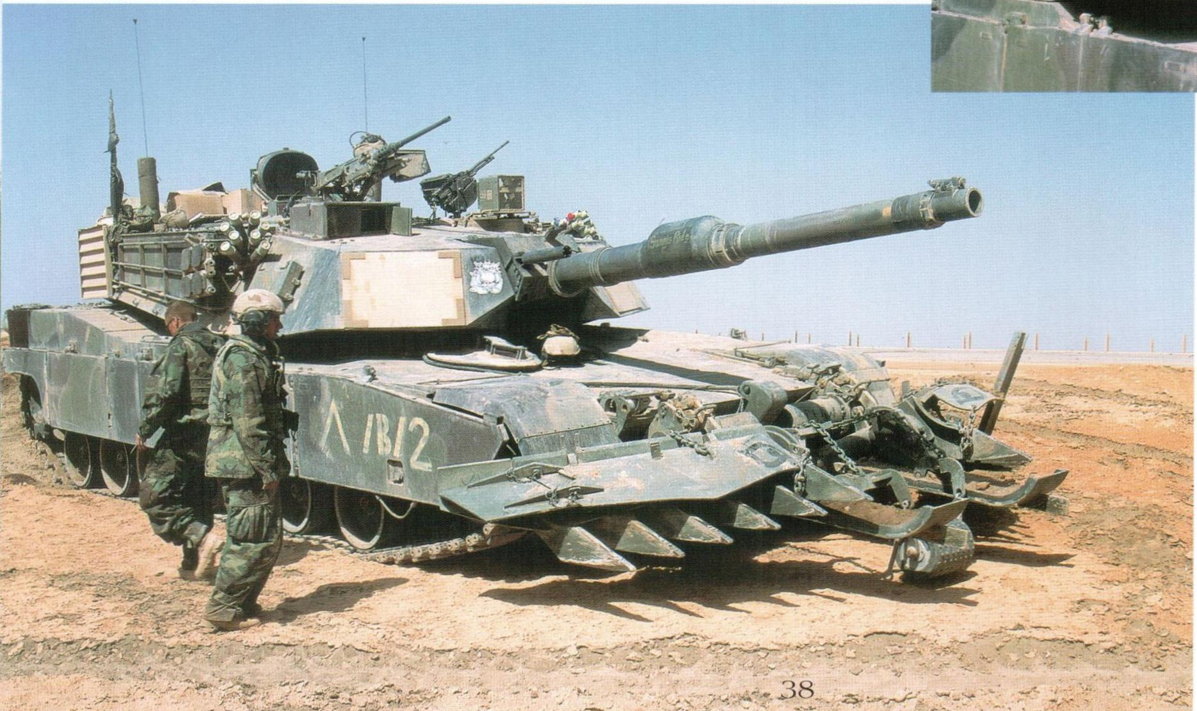


The M-1A1 is particularly thirsty for its fuel, which is similar to aviation fuel. The two tons available in the tank can quickly be replaced by the supply company (H Company), which would not hesitate to fill up the tank, even during a skirmish at the front, as was the case when this photo was taken 40 kilometers north of Diwaniyah.

Far away from the sea, the USMC would act as an equal with the US Army during this second Gulf War since it was essentially a mechanized war that was waged from Kuwait to Tikrit. The 1st MEF was organized as a mobile armored force based on the strike force represented by the pairing of the M-1A1 Abrams and the Amtrac. The 1st, 2nd and 8th Marine Tank Battalions, with their 180 M-1A1s, took part in the action. Most of the task forces, which were also called Regimental Combat Teams, would combine a tank company and one or two of the Marine battalions with their support and supply units. It was common to see two platoons of Abrams tanks lead the way with one platoon in the middle of the column and one in the rear.

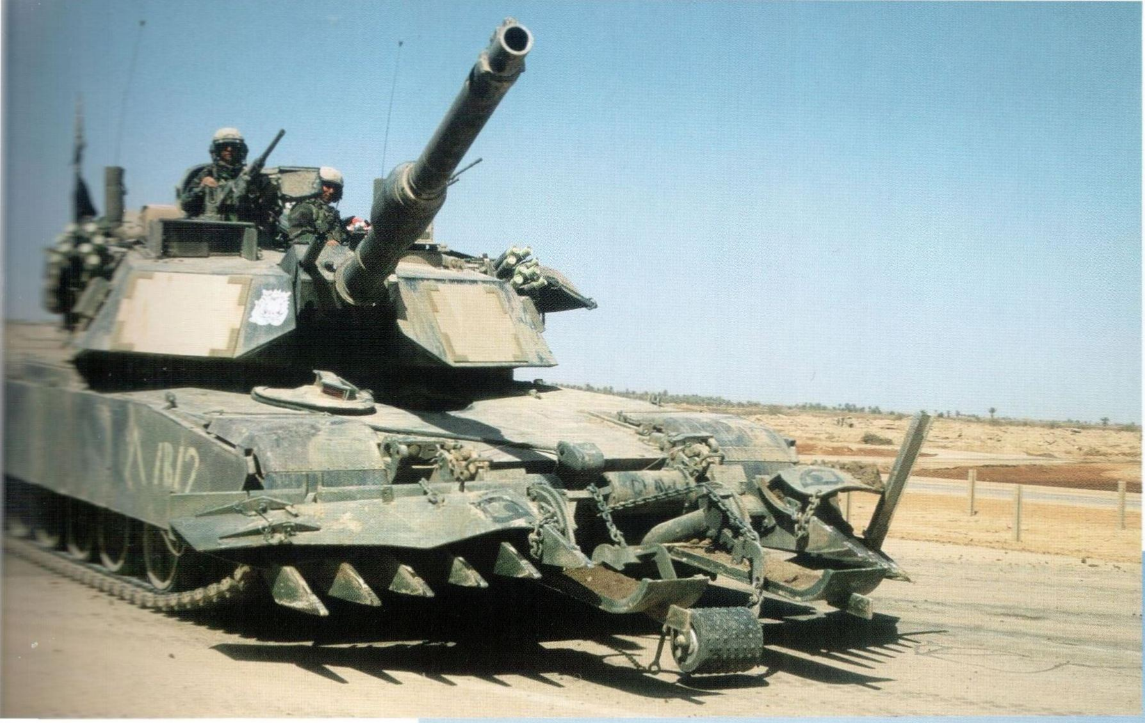


The turret of this M-1A1 Abrams is decorated with an image of a bulldog, the mascot of the US Marine Corps. Since the substitution of the Marine Corps' 716 M-60A1s with the 403 M-1A1s, the Marines tanks have been modified in several ways.

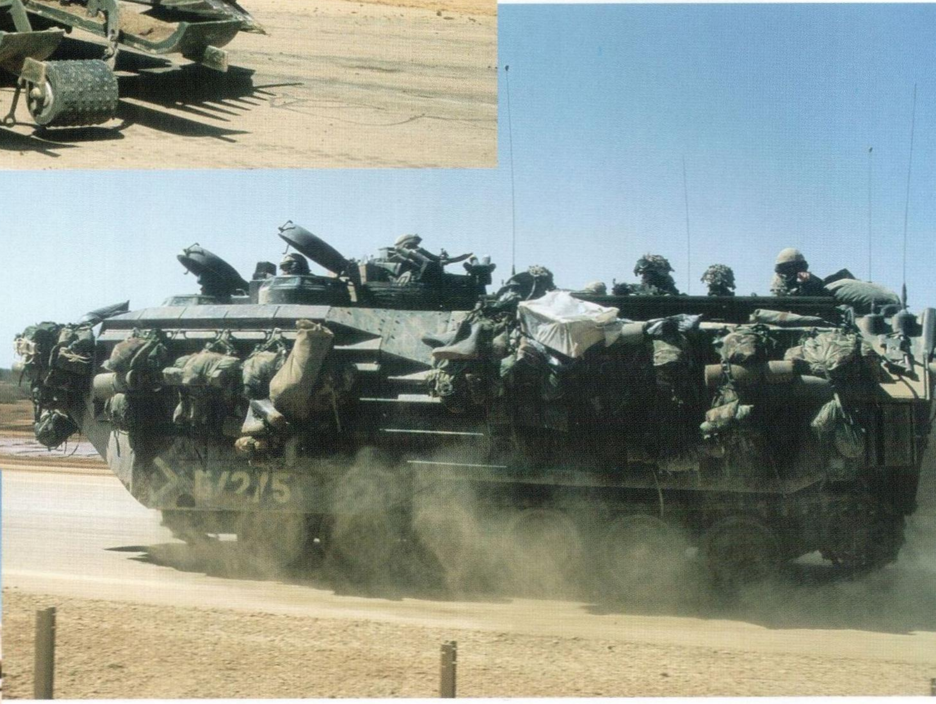


The main modifications made to the USMC M-1A1 tanks consist of a fording kit for deep water, a PLRS (Position Locating Reporting System), an external generator, an anti-missile jamming kit, and a digital control unit.

In the Marine Corps, the AAV-7A1 retained it old name of Amtrac. The 1st MEF relied on the 2nd and 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalions of the USMC and their 187 infantry-version Amtracs to transport the 14 infantry battalions and their support units. Each big amphibious vehicle is able to carry 25 Marines, so a platoon of 14 vehicles carrying a company and its staff would have no difficulty covering the 500 km between Kuwait City and Baghdad.

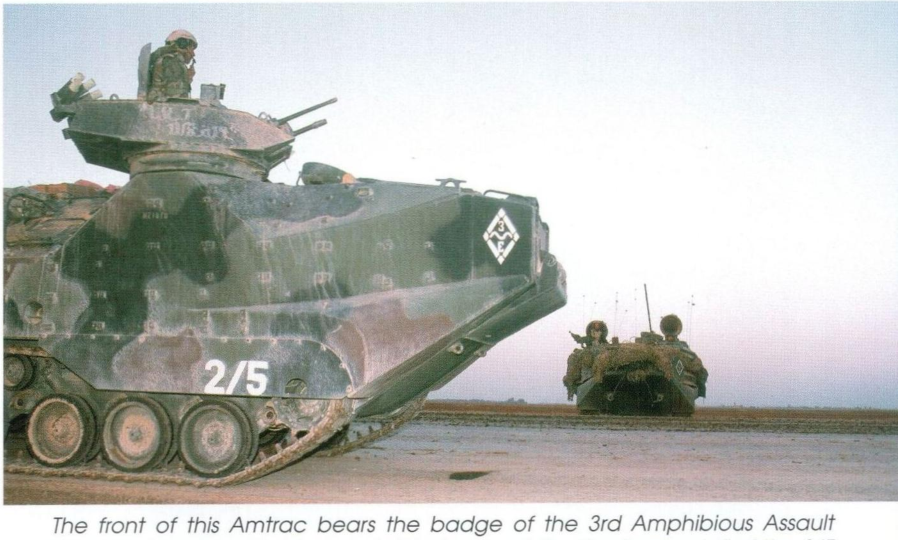


Many of the M-1A1s issued to the Marines are fitted with the RAMTA mine-clearing plough.



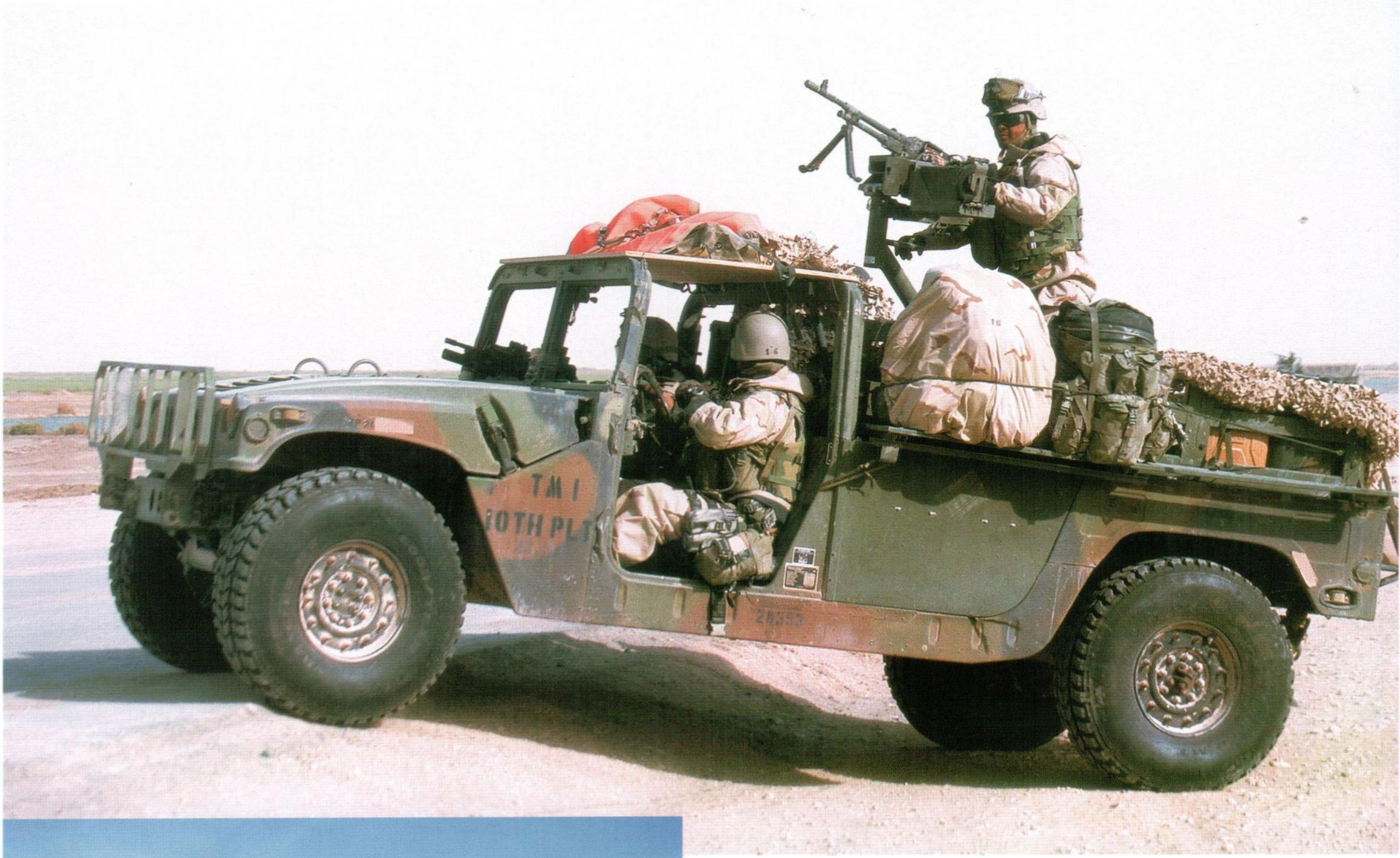
A nice view of an Amtrac traveling at full speed. It was amazing to see such a "monster" manage so well in combat and during cross-country travel. Note the crew's personal gear attached to the vehicle.

Just like in a cargo plane or a helicopter, each Amtrac has its own "loadmaster," a soldier in charge of overseeing the boarding and landing of the combat team. Note the M-240 machine gunner on the roof.



The front of this Amtrac bears the badge of the 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalion, which was called to the Gulf to transport the "leathernecks" of the 2/5 Marines. Note the turret with the .50-caliber machine gun and the Mk.19 automatic grenade launcher. An amphibious assault battalion has at its disposal 187 AAV-7A1 (troop carrier), 15 AAVC-7A1 (command post), and the 5 AAVR-7A1 (recovery).

2nd Recon Battalion Heads to the Tigris



The men of the Marine recon unit head out to capture some bridges and test the capacity of the enemy forces to resist an assault, information they will pass on to the command of the MEF.

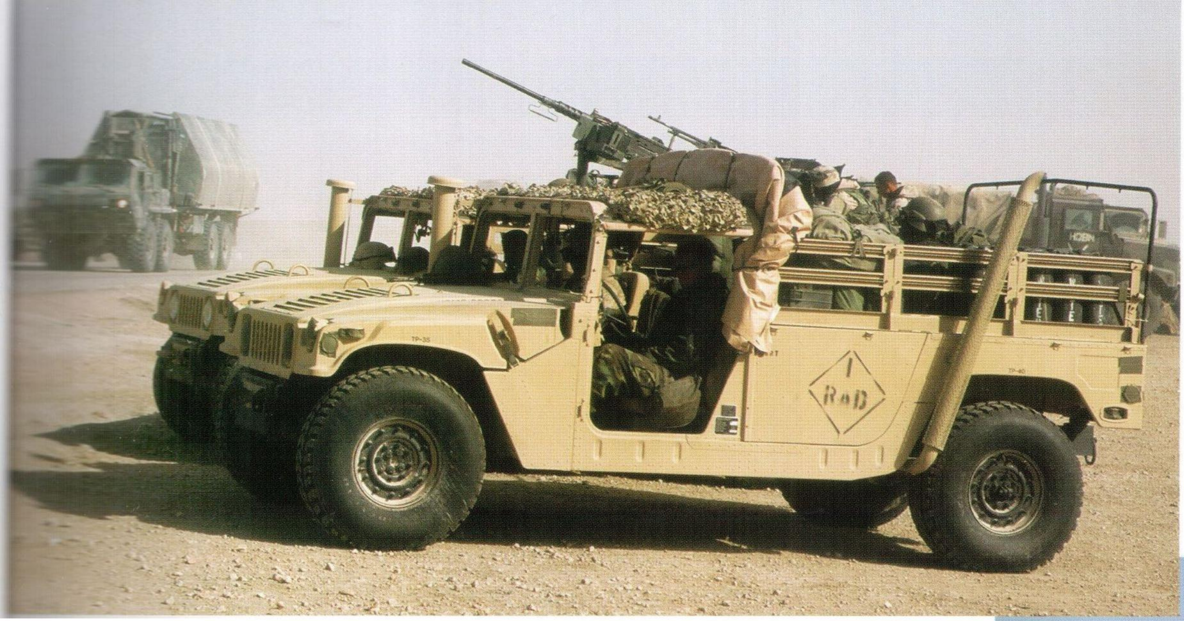
These Humvees belong to the special Marine recon unit that would probe the Tigris River.

The recon Marines leave the desert to carry out a reconnaissance mission at the Tigris River.

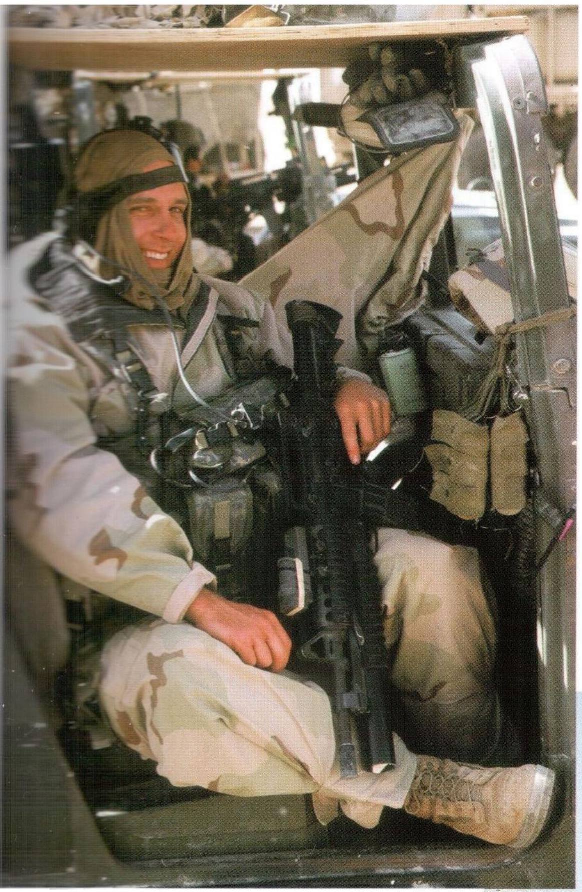
The US Marine Corps has two kinds of reconnaissance units. The first, the Force Recon companies (85 men), operate directly for the MEF more than 16 km (10 miles) behind the enemy's front line. The second, the Recon Battalion, is in charge of reconnaissance for the division within ten miles of the enemy's front line. Force Recon can be considered a Special Forces unit, while the Recon Battalion is mainly Marines trained especially for reconnaissance. The two units are quite close since two Force Recon companies are under the administrative command of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. In any case, these soldiers are discreet, so little information is available.

During a forced halt at 1st MEF Headquarters, 50 km south of Diwaniyah, during my second arrest, I see a group of men mounted on twenty Humvees. Obviously they are awaiting orders and preparing themselves for action. From their appearance and equipment, I can tell that these Marines are not normal "leathernecks."

At first they do not speak to me, but after 12 hours of close contact I learn that they are part of the 2nd Recon Battalion and that some Force Recon elements are mixed in with them for Operation "Iraqi Freedom." Looking at their Humvees, I notice there is a difference between those in one row and those in another. After recovering my camera, I record for history the departure of these Humvees, which are going to conduct reconnaissance of the Tigris River on 1 April. It was 48 hours before the 1st MEF would make its crossing of the river.



This sand-colored Humvee is somewhat of an enigma. It wears the diamond-shaped badge of the 1st Marine Division, but officially only the 2nd Marine Recon Battalion, under the 2nd Division, is engaged in Iraq.

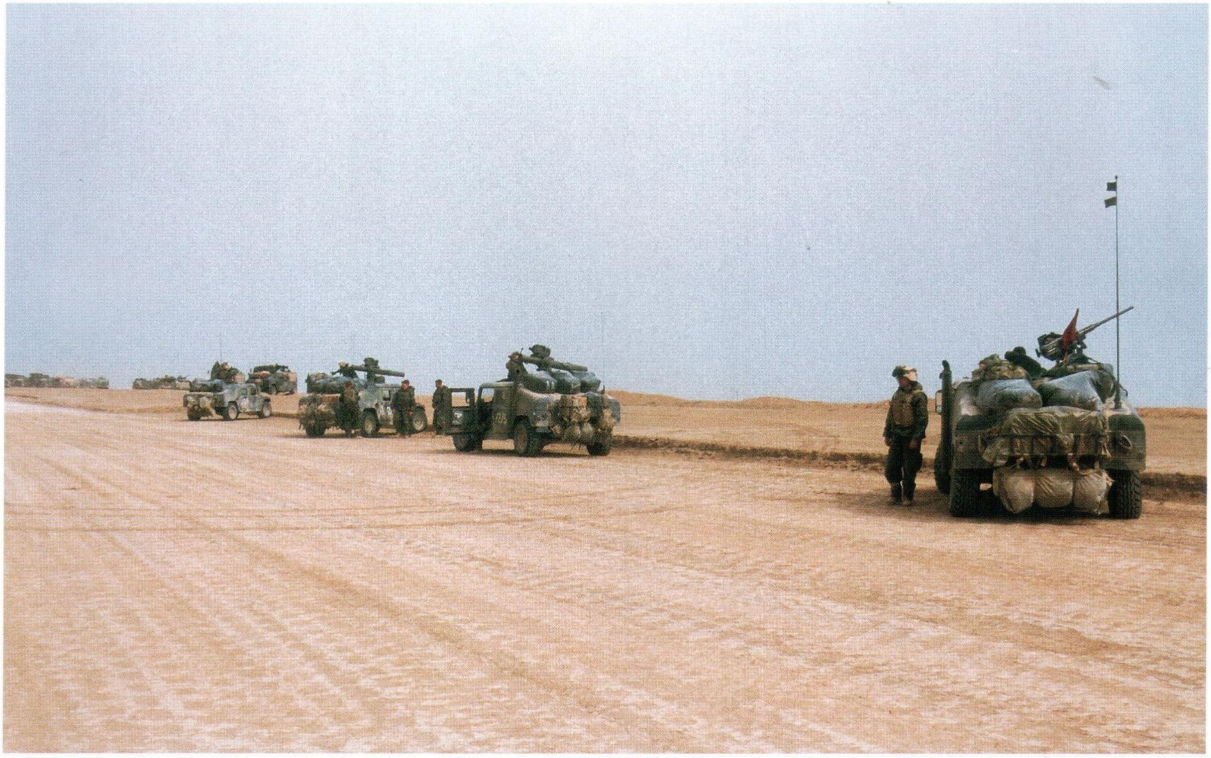


This photograph has captured the appearance of a typical member of the Marine reconnaissance forces. Note that the 3-color camouflage pattern on his battle dress uniform differs from that worn by US forces in the Gulf at the beginning of the 1990s.

Protected from the elements behind scarves and goggles, these Marine recon troops are ready to advance to the Tigris. There they would engage in what turned out to be some of the toughest combat the Marines faced during the campaign, despite the superior firepower of the MEF.

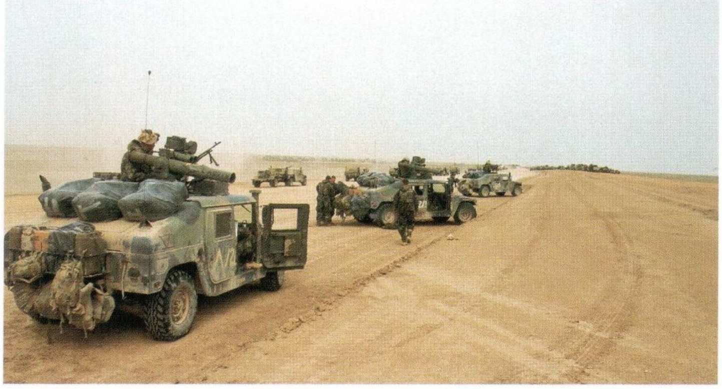
With their Humvees loaded and their gear stowed, Marines await the order to proceed with their reconnaissance mission to assess the strength of the enemy and secure crossing points over the Tigris River.

Humvee

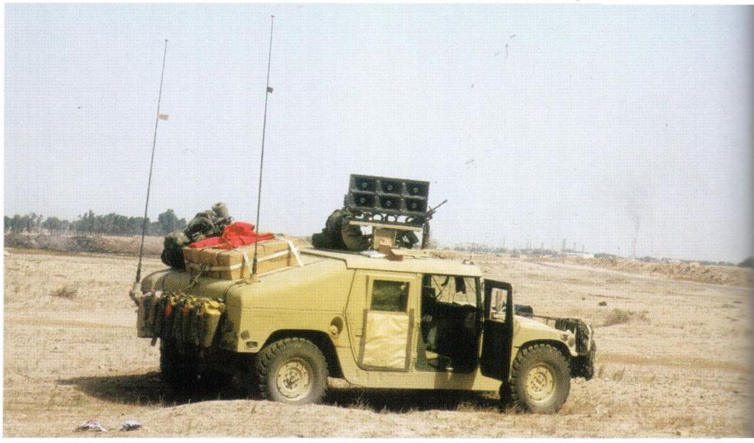


The Humvee officially replaced the ubiquitous jeep within the MEF. Actually called the HMMWV (High Mobility Multipurpose Vehicle), the vehicle is known as the Humvee or Hummer among the troops. It can be used to fight inside the Combined Anti-Armor Team (CAAT), but it is also used as liaison, signal, military police, or light cargo vehicles.

Each platoon in the CAAT is also equipped with four Javelin launchers. The team's main missions are reconnaissance, support, close-fire in support, anti-tank, and FAC (Forward Air Control).

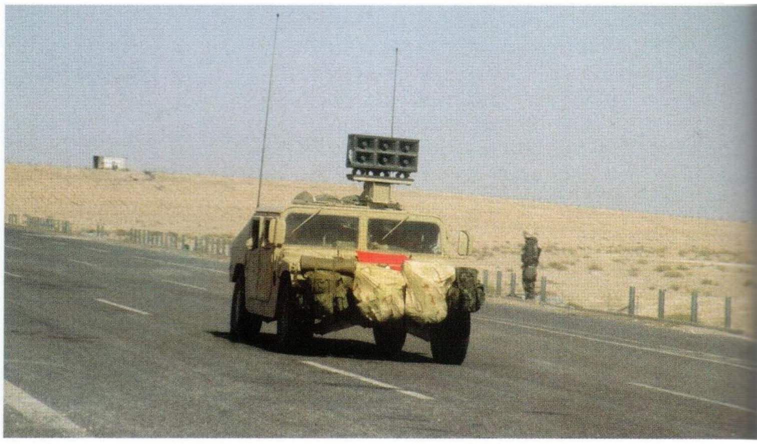


A Hummer belonging to the CAAT of the 2/5 Marines. The team is made up of two platoons with four sections each. Each section has four Humvees. The sections may have anti-tank Humvees mounted with TOW launchers, or support vehicles armed with a .50-caliber MG or Mk.19 automatic grenade launcher.



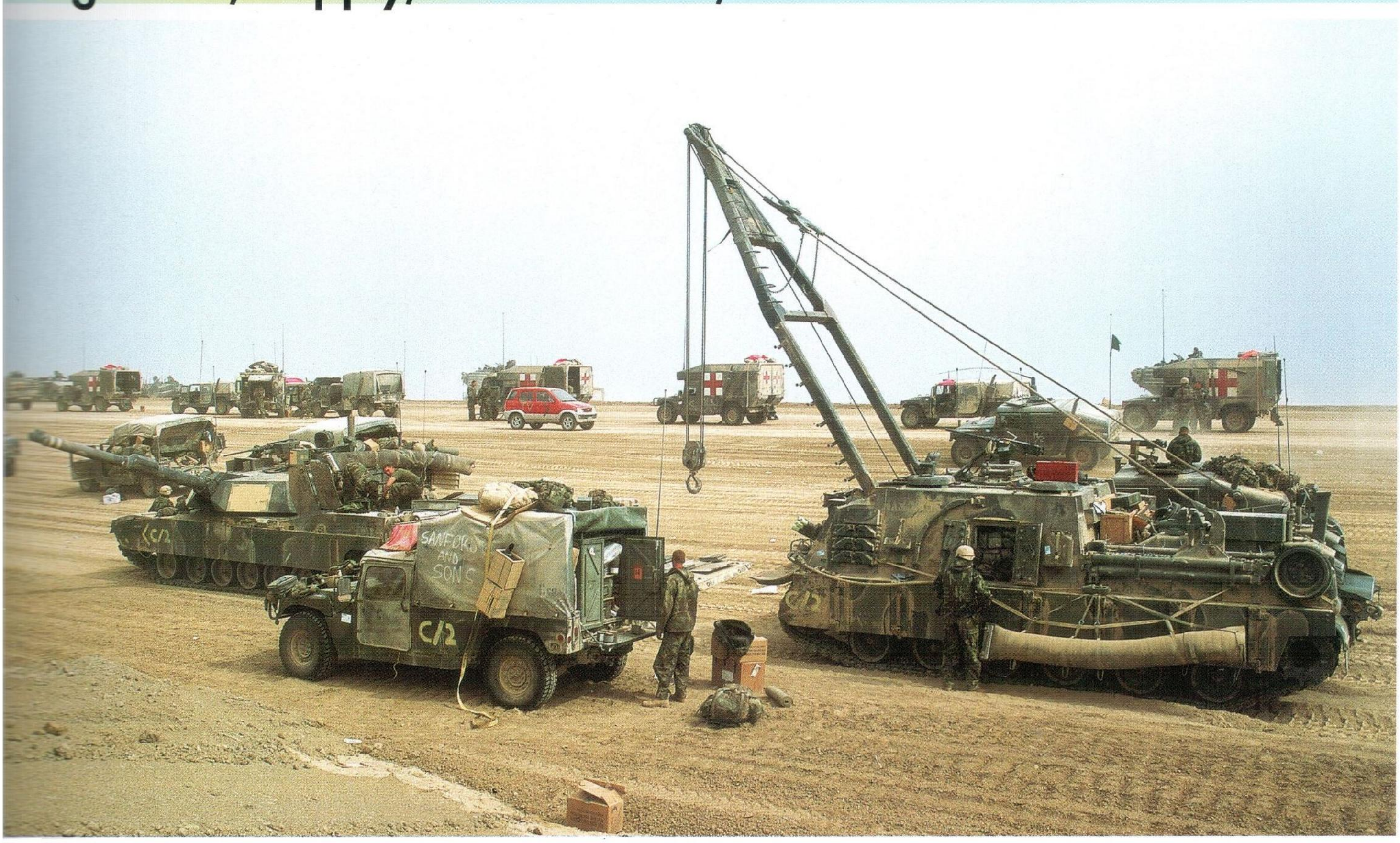
A special version of the Humvee is equipped with a powerful speaker system. The vehicle belongs to the "Civil Affairs" unit attached to the HQ of every Regimental Combat Team.

The Iraqi sunset creates a deadly silhouette of a Humvee from the CAAT of 3/4 Marines that is armed with a Mk.19 automatic grenade launcher.



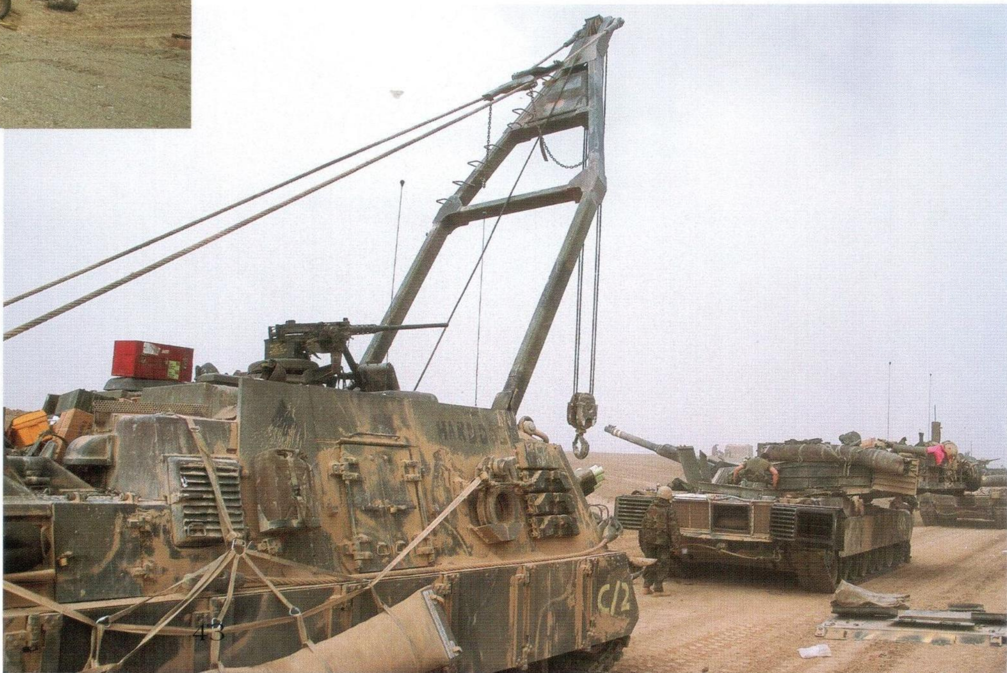
By means of the speakers attached to this Humvee, Arabic interpreters advise the Iraqi population to stay at home during periods of combat.

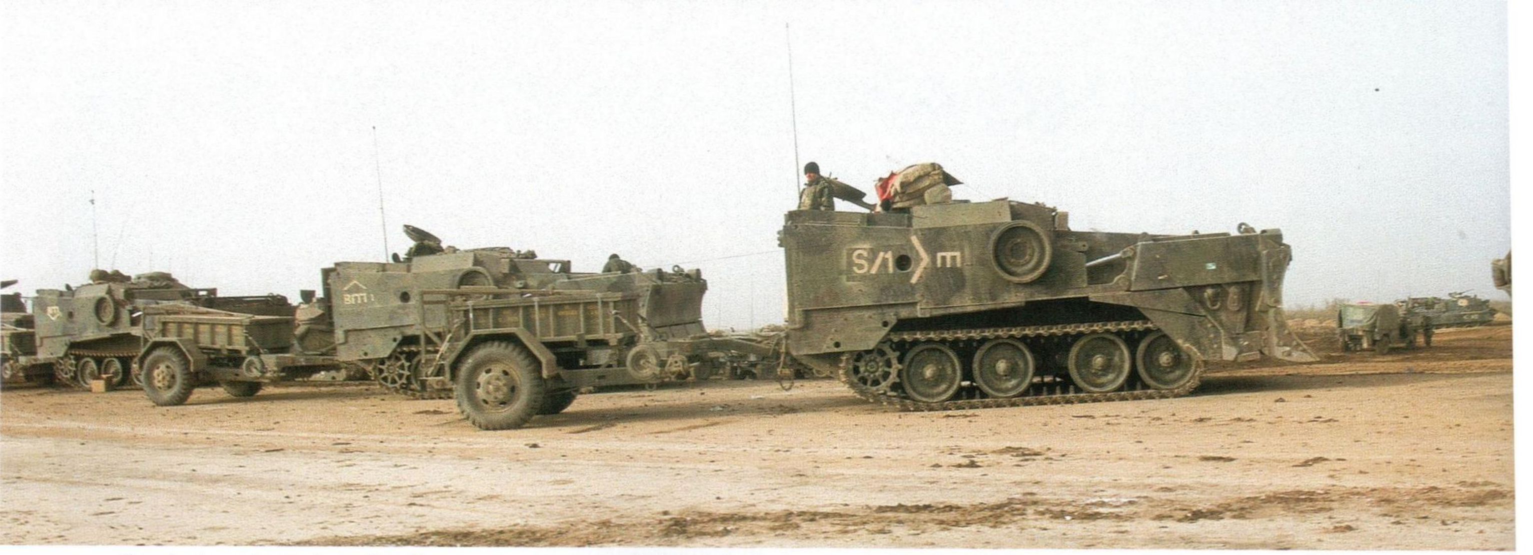
Engineers, Supply, Maintenance, etc.


For three weeks, the Marines conducted a classic mechanized operation. They became used to seeing the latest version of the M-88 recovery tank, the M-88A2 Hercules, which is seen here. The small red car in the distant background is the author's own vehicle.

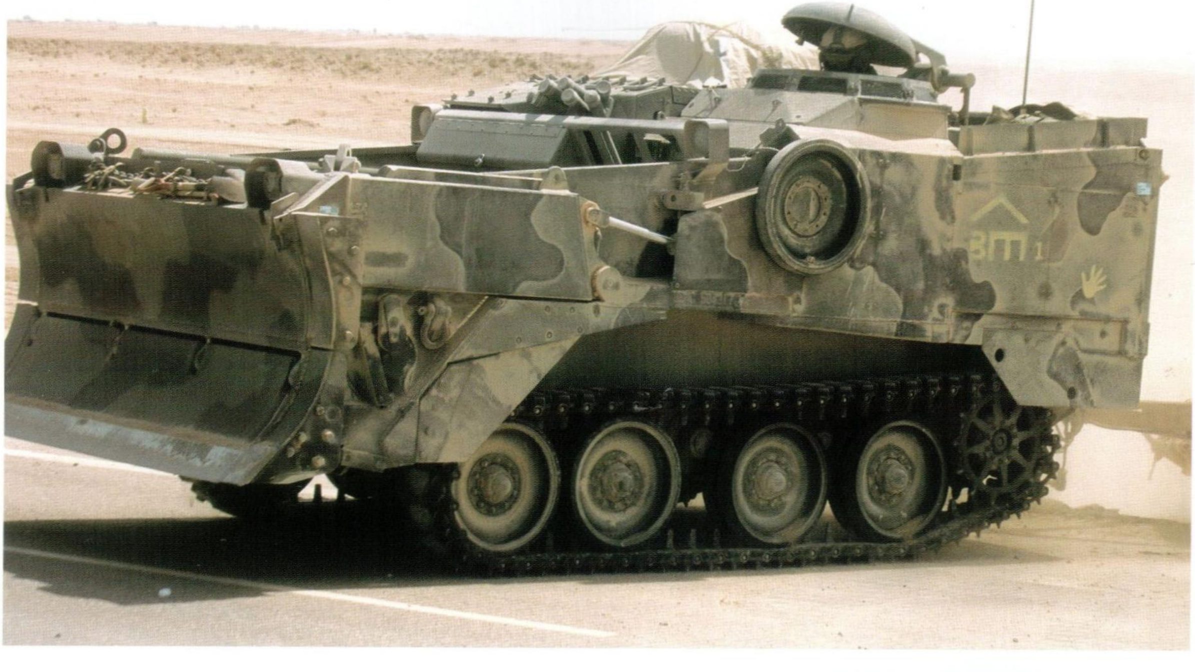
During its grand advance to Baghdad, the 1st MEF employed hundreds of different vehicles beside the M-1A1s, LAVs and Amtracs. The sight of the mounting column was an impressive one. Some convoys consisted of 200 vehicles, the largest convoy in the history of the USMC.

A combat workshop springs up in the middle of nowhere in the Iraqi desert. The Americans' logistic system and their capacity to repair damaged vehicles in the field were amazing.


The M-88A2 Hercules is fitted with new armor plating. The Hercules made its first sortie during Operation "Iraqi Freedom."



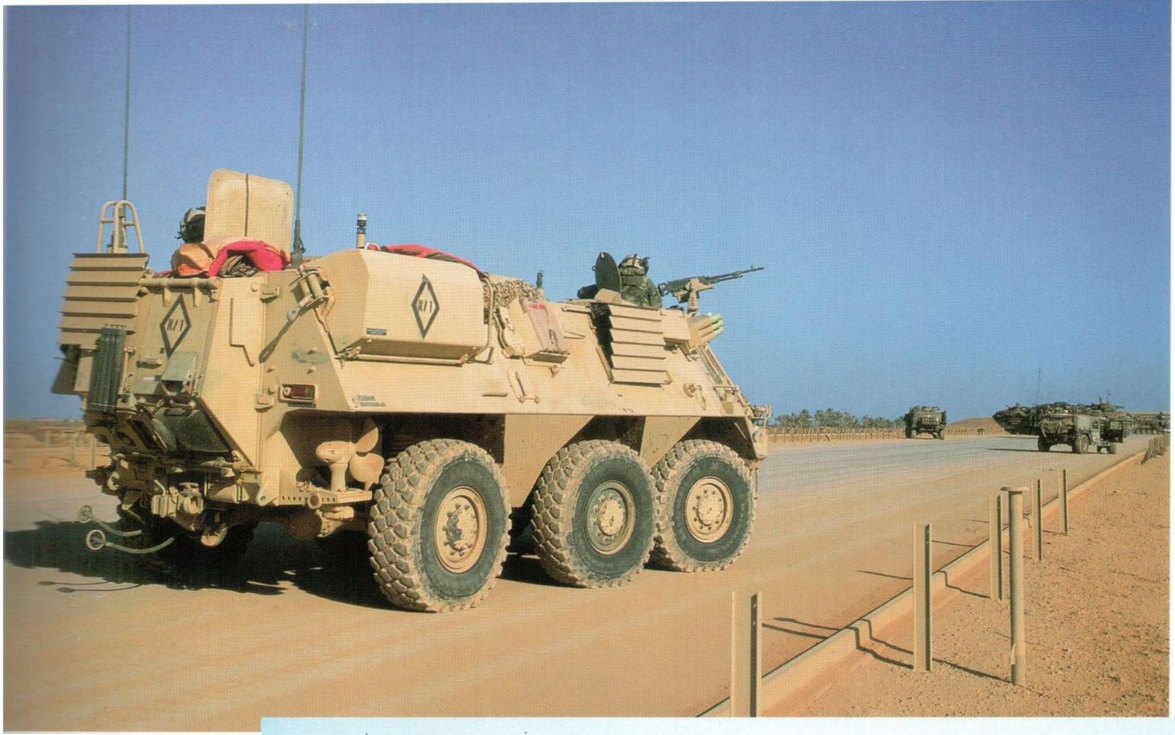
Combat engineers in action. There are certain special vehicles belonging to the 2nd Marine Combat Engineer Battalion that were essential parts of the spearhead of the division. Here an M-9 ACE (Armored Combat Earth Mover) tows a MICLIC (Mine Clearing Line Charge) toward Baghdad.



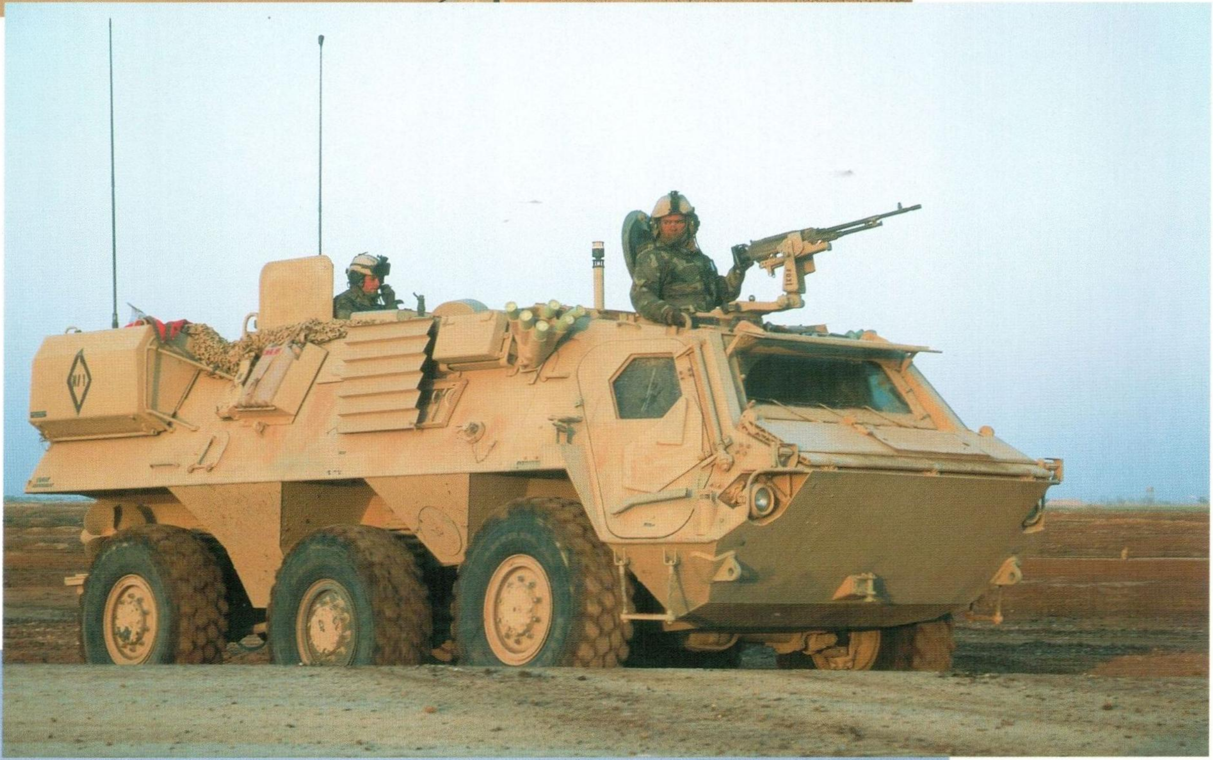
With the assistance of an M-9 ACE, the MICLIC can project an 800-kg (1760-lb) explosive device into a minefield to create a breach 12m wide and 100m long.

An M-9 ACE displays a rugged ability to haul the MICLIC mine-clearing device anywhere it needs to be.

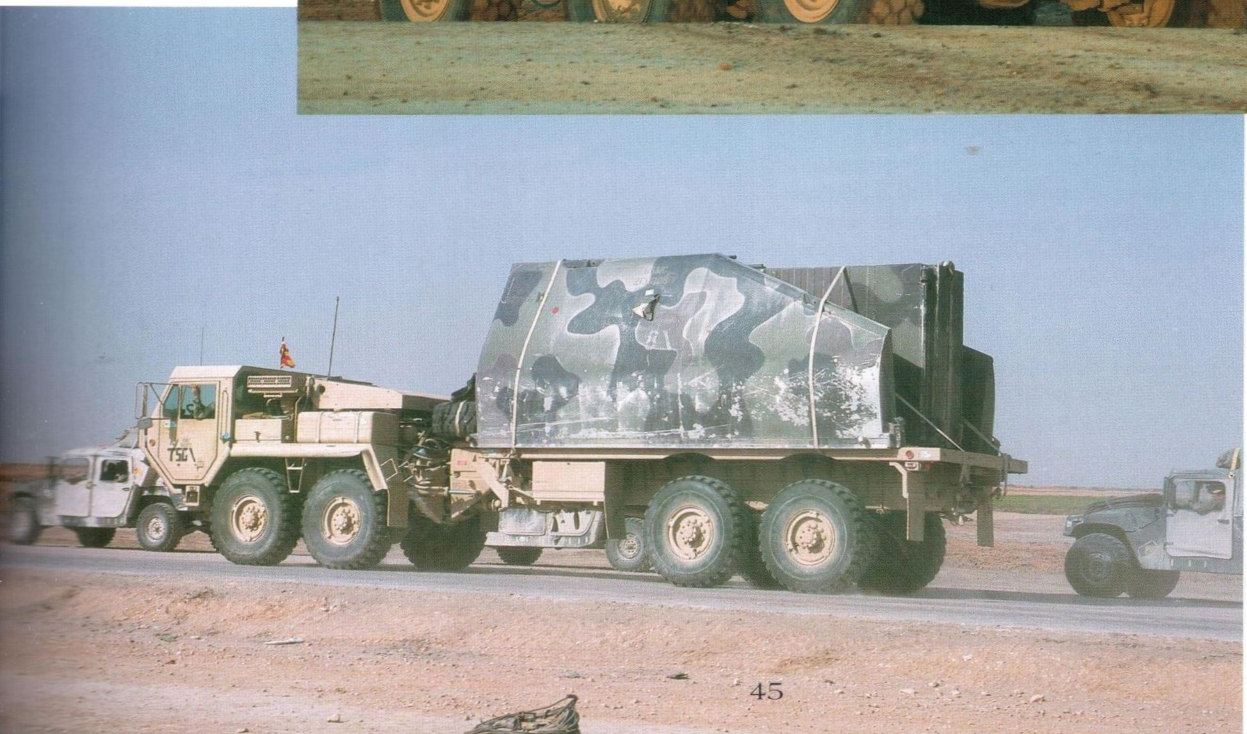
A six-wheeled Fuchs NBC armored vehicle rolls down the road past an M-9 armored bulldozer during the Marines' advance to Baghdad.



Each command company of a Marine Regimental Combat Team has detached to it for the operation a Fuchs NBC armored vehicle and an LAV in the ECM version. Both vehicles were often seen together on the road to Baghdad.



The NBC version of the Fuchs was tasked with detecting a nuclear, biological or chemical threat to the coalition forces.



In the event that the Iraqis blew the bridge over the Tigris River, the USMC pontoon units were ready. The 2nd Force Service Support Group was composed of several specialized units, including the 8th Engineer Support Battalion with its floating bridge. One of the unit's trucks is seen here on the move toward the bank of the Tigris.

Logistics

MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) rations (nicknamed "Meals Rejected by Ethiopians" by the troops) are distributed in a Regimental Combat Team of the 2/5 Marines not far from Diwaniyah. The non-commissioned officer overseeing distribution assured the author that "every ration's here. Count 'em." To the men doing the unloading he urges, "Watch out, guys, don't waste them," an attitude that was not always shared among the troops.

Logistics has always been the strong suit of the US Army, even surpassing the USMC in re-supply ability. But within the prestigious Marine Corps, the MEF consists of a ground combat force, an air force and a logistic force! For every front-line soldier in the US Army, there are three people attached to support units. The war in Iraq requires an endless stream of trucks hauling fuel, food and ammunition from Kuwait. Each combat unit possesses enough of these supplies to remain autonomous for three days.

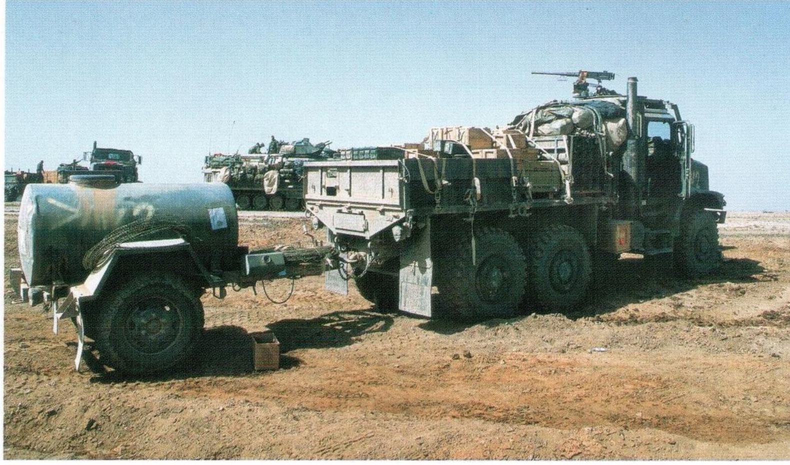
A total of 48 million combat rations and 2.4 million humanitarian rations were sent to the Gulf. A 16,000-man division consumes more than a million liters of water per day. That means 3.8 million liters per day for the all the units fighting in Iraq. As the US forces approached closer to Baghdad, water became scarce and officers rationed the essential commodity.

The author met a young lieutenant serving in a support unit in the 2nd Transportation Battalion who was in command of about twenty Oshkosh trucks filled with fuel for M-1A1 tanks. Covered with dust, the officer stated: "For me the war amounts to bringing fuel from Kuwait then returning to bring back more. The trip lasts for two days. Fortunately, when we drive in the desert the Iraqis do not try to break the logistic stream. Nevertheless, a convoy is [extremely] vulnerable."

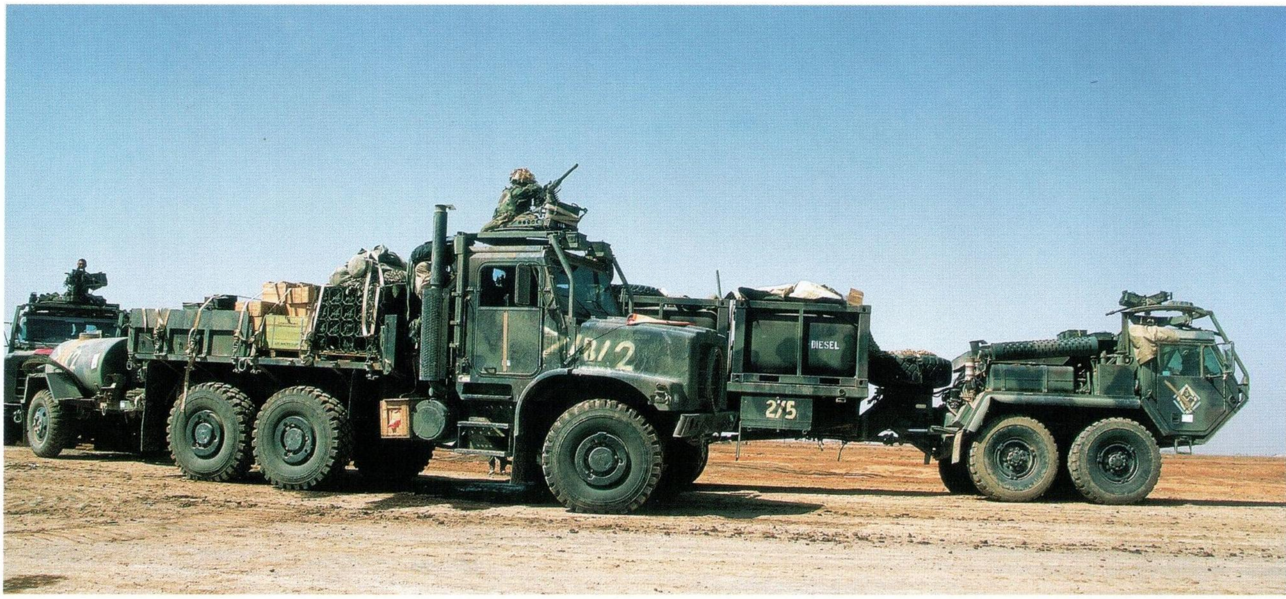
As the advance continued, storage places, depots and workshops sprang up like mushrooms around Diwaniyah and Nasiriyah. At one of them, the author counted more than one hundred trucks carrying fuel and ammunition. A single rocket from an RPG-7 could have caused considerable damage and loss of life that may have forced the Americans to remove troops from the front lines to protect their rear, but apparently the Iraqis lack the spirit of the SAS.

A column of cistern trucks heads back to Kuwait to load fuel for a return trip to the advancing US forces. Imagine the damage that could be inflicted by a low-flying helicopter or a simple ambush if the coalition forces had not kept the Iraqis in check.

Along the logistic routes, any abandoned US vehicles were a result not of Iraqi opposition but of mechanical failure. The author personally counted more than twenty otherwise sound Oshkosh trucks that had broken down.



This Oshkosh truck is loaded with ammunition for 120mm guns and boxes of 7mm and 7.62mm ammo. The cistern in tow contains drinking water. The soldiers of Hotel Company often supply the front lines while under fire!



A Mk.3 Oshkosh 7-ton truck, which is able to carry a 15-ton load, leaves for the front lines to re-supply an M1A1 Abrams unit.

Ambush

At dawn on 27 March, the 2/5 Marines left Dawiniyah and headed northward. Along the highway, the Amtracs and M-1A1s appeared to be on parade, racing at 65 km/h (40mph). USAF A-10A Thunderbolts made several low passes over the column. At about 0800, as the column approached Dagharah, Fedayeen militia hidden near the highway opened fire with light weapons. Bullets whizzed overhead. A civilian truck that had the misfortune to pass by was destroyed by an M-1A1.

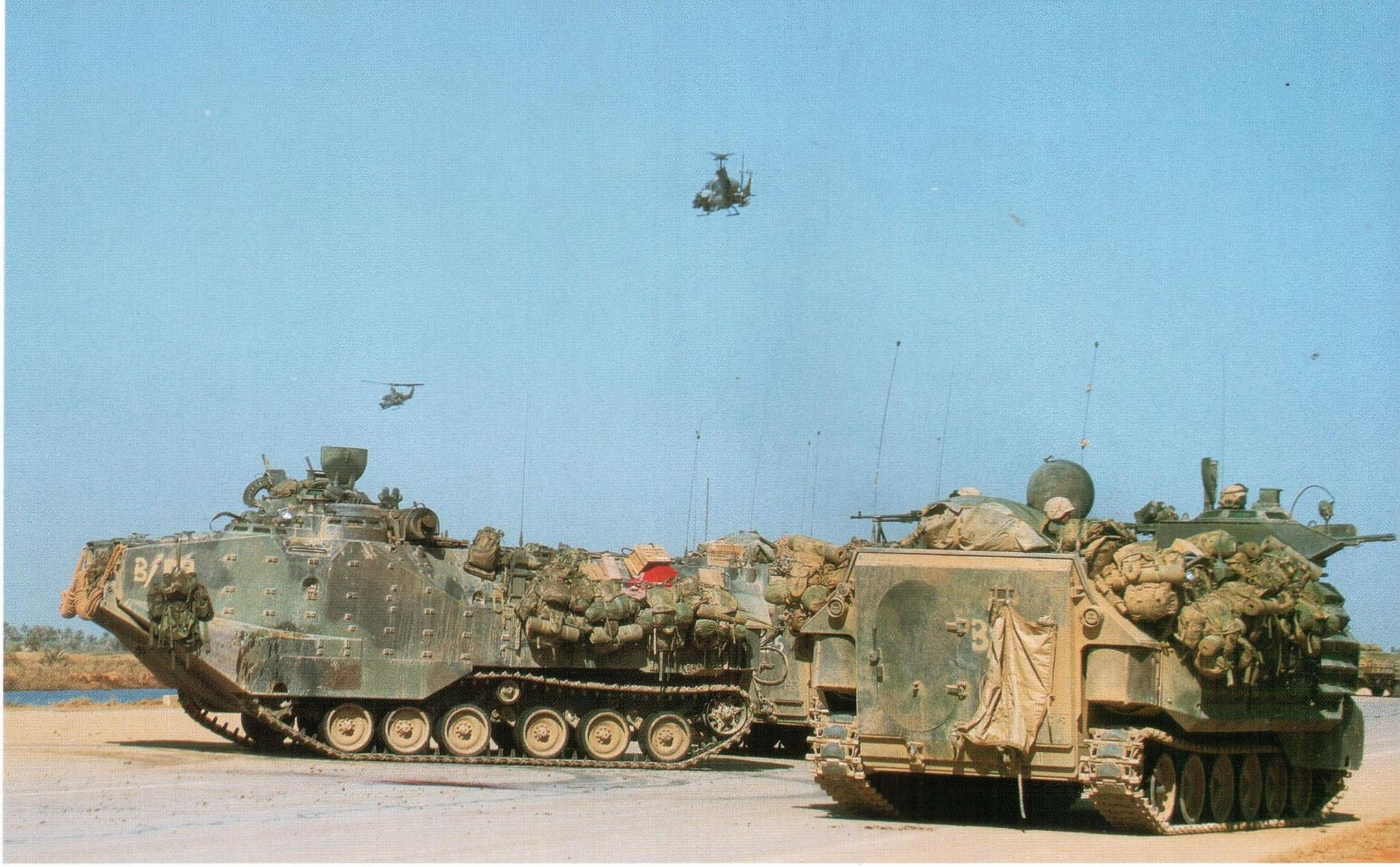
Confusion reigned at the head of the column. One Amtrac stopped, fired its 12.7mm machine gun and ignited a purple smoke grenade to distinguish itself for the Cobra helicopters flying overhead. Another amphibious armored vehicle engaged the enemy. The artillery also got involved in the action, sending shells over the heads of the advanced elements to explode two kilometers to the left. Off to the right, an AAV-7A1 fired sporadic bursts. The skirmish ended at 0900.

One hour later, a new company, Golf of the 2/5, arrived and began to fire in different directions. "Leathernecks" dismounted their Amtrac and spread out to the left. A hundred meters in front of them, a mortar round exploded. The author believed it was the Iraqis returning fire, but it turned out to be first unadjusted Marine mortar fire. The company soon attacked some sheds that were clobbered by mortar fire that was now on target. The combat train even got involved, spraying the shanties with 12.7mm rounds. Shots were being fired from countless weapons in all directions. An F/A-18 flew above looking for a target. For all of the explosions, none of its seemed to coming from opposing forces. Amid all of the shooting, loudspeakers on the Humvees operated by the Civil Affairs unit blare directives to the civilians to stay out of harm's way.

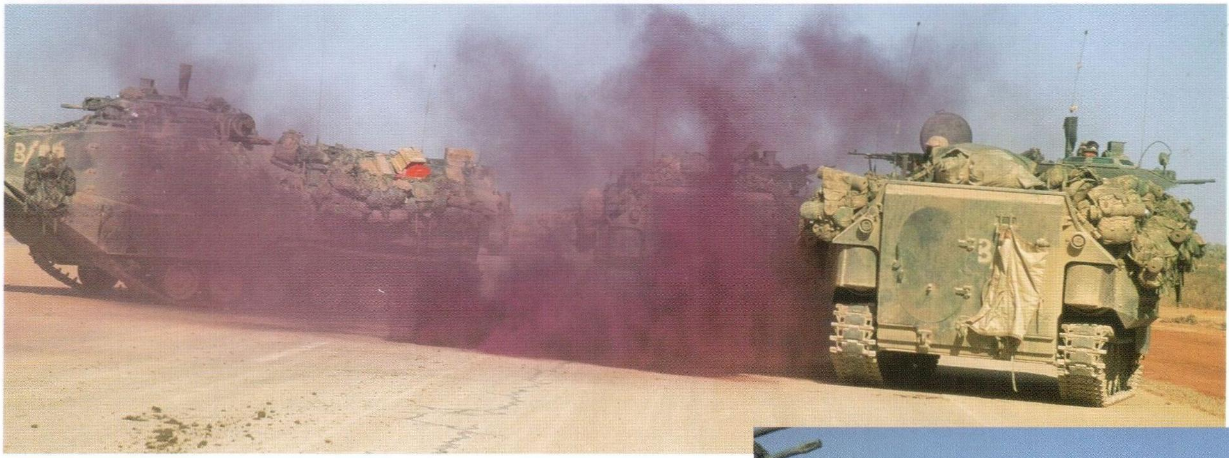
During a lull, a soldier from the supply train informed the author that one of the Marines from Golf Company had been killed. Though he did not say so, based on what he had witnessed he believed it was "friendly fire" that caused the death. At 1120, Cobras arrived and destroyed several huts with their TOW, an expensive price to pay for four walls of dried earth. A UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter marked with a red cross passed overhead and landed not far from the author. Over the radio they announced that one Marine was badly wounded.

Sporadic gunfire could be heard for two hours. Occasionally, intense fire from tanks, artillery and a passing A-10A was heard. At 1500, all of the vehicles made a half-turn and headed southward. At about 1600, the column stopped to avoid a major traffic jam on the highway. The Marines set up an "all around" defense in impressive silence. The situation seemed serious. A major using the radio, as well as his staff, wore stern looks. A technical NCO passing by the author asked him, "How much are you being paid to be in this mess?"

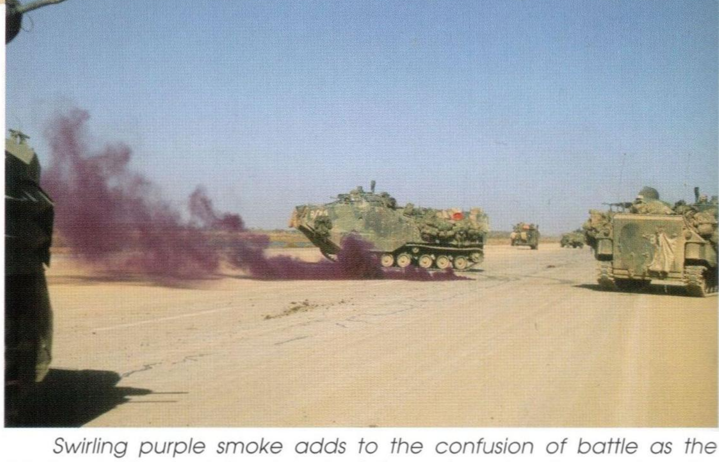
Because of a lack of information, the author never found out what took place on that day. But he did note fear in the eyes of the Marine.



This photograph was taken shortly after the Amtracs at the head of the column came under Iraqi fire. Note the Cobra helicopters flying overhead.



Responding to the light weapons fire, an Amtrac pops a canister of purple smoke to indicate his position as head of the column to the Cobras.

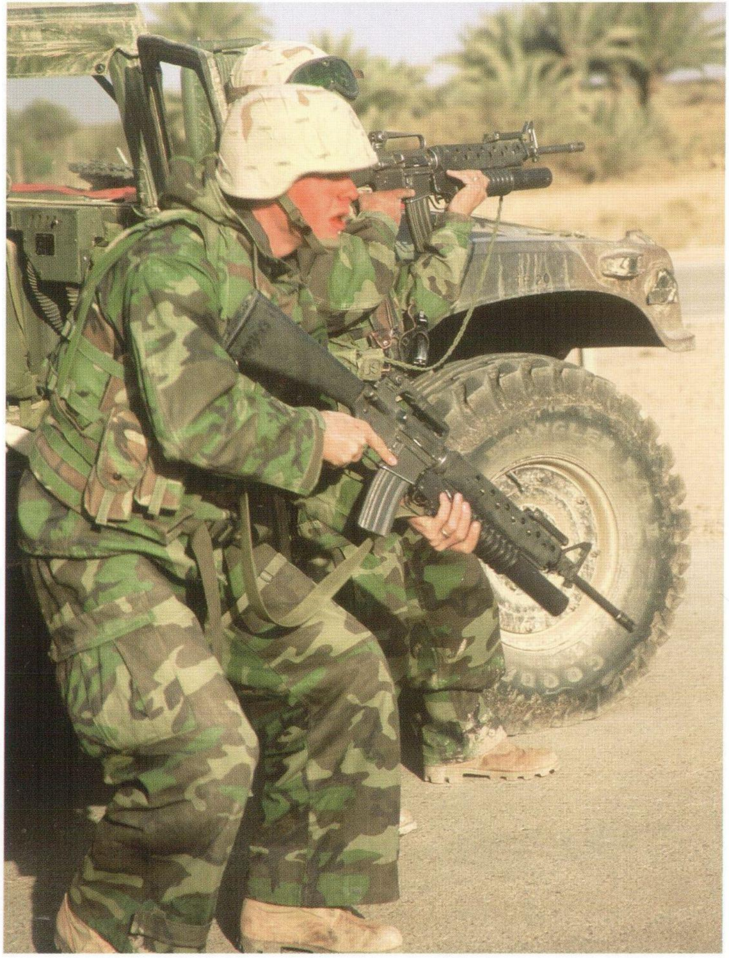


Swirling purple smoke adds to the confusion of battle as the Marine Amtracs at the head of the advancing force return fire against the Iraqis that launched the ambush.

Tense and alert as any troops are that come under surprise fire, the crewmembers of a Humvee take up firing positions.

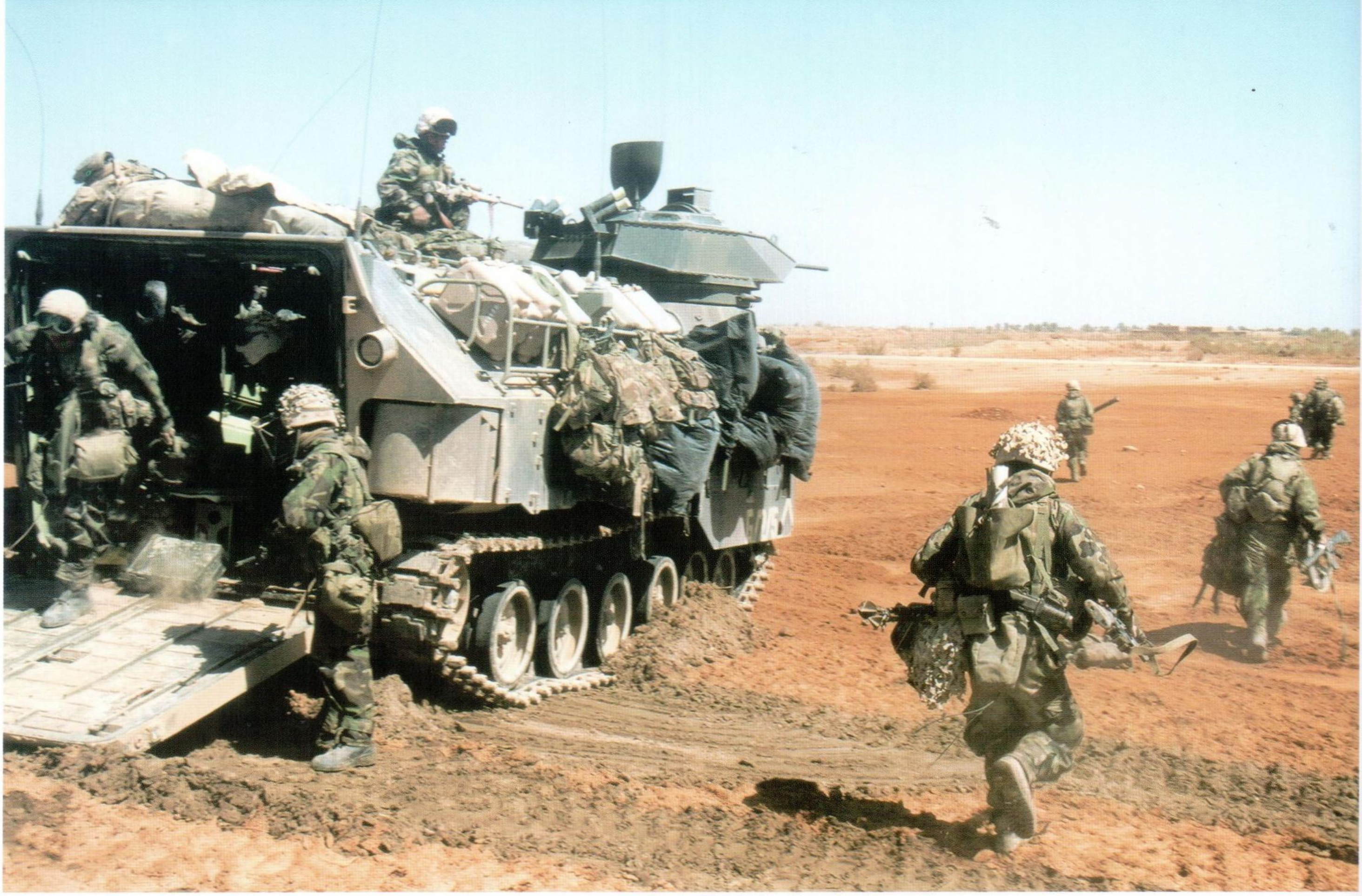
Illustrating just how confusing battle can be, a pair of Marines aim in two different directions. An explosion can be distinguished in the background just above the side-view mirror.

Visible on the horizon in this photo is evidence that the artillery has joined the action to provide the Marines with some relief. The impact of the artillery shells is about one hundred meters beyond the Amtrac seen in the foreground.

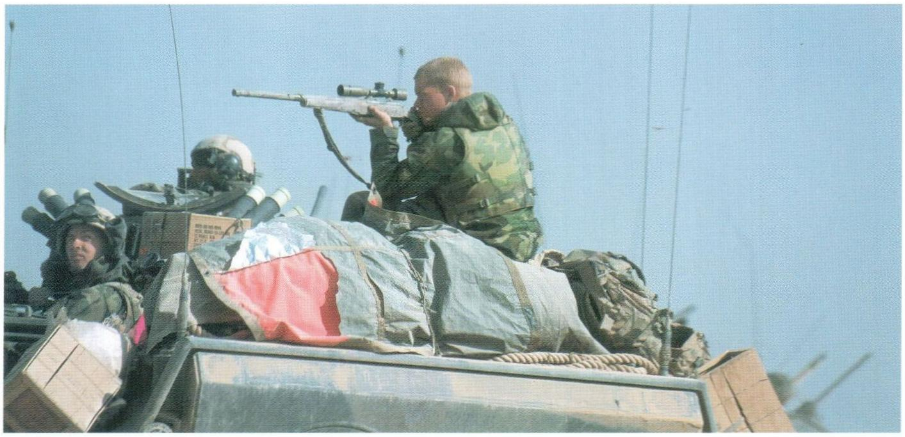


This Marine is typical in appearance to the rest of his fellow "leathernecks" in the MEF. His uniform consists of a Fritz-style helmet with desert camouflage cover, woodland-pattern BDUs and gear, and hiking-style boots. His weapon is the standard 5.56x45mm NATO M-16A2 assault rifle with a 40mm grenade launcher mounted beneath its barrel. He also wears the expression of concern and determination that has been seen on the face of combat Marines throughout history.

Marines from Golf Company of the 2/5 Marines emerge from their AAV-7A1 to silence the Fedayeen forces that ambushed the column.

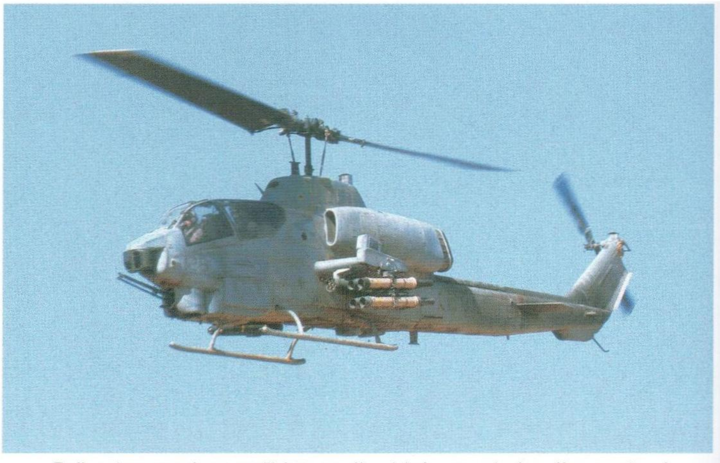


Hustling out of their Amtrac, "leathernecks" from the 2/5 Marines begin a hunt for the Iraqi militiamen. Only minutes after this photo was taken, a Marine from G Company was killed.

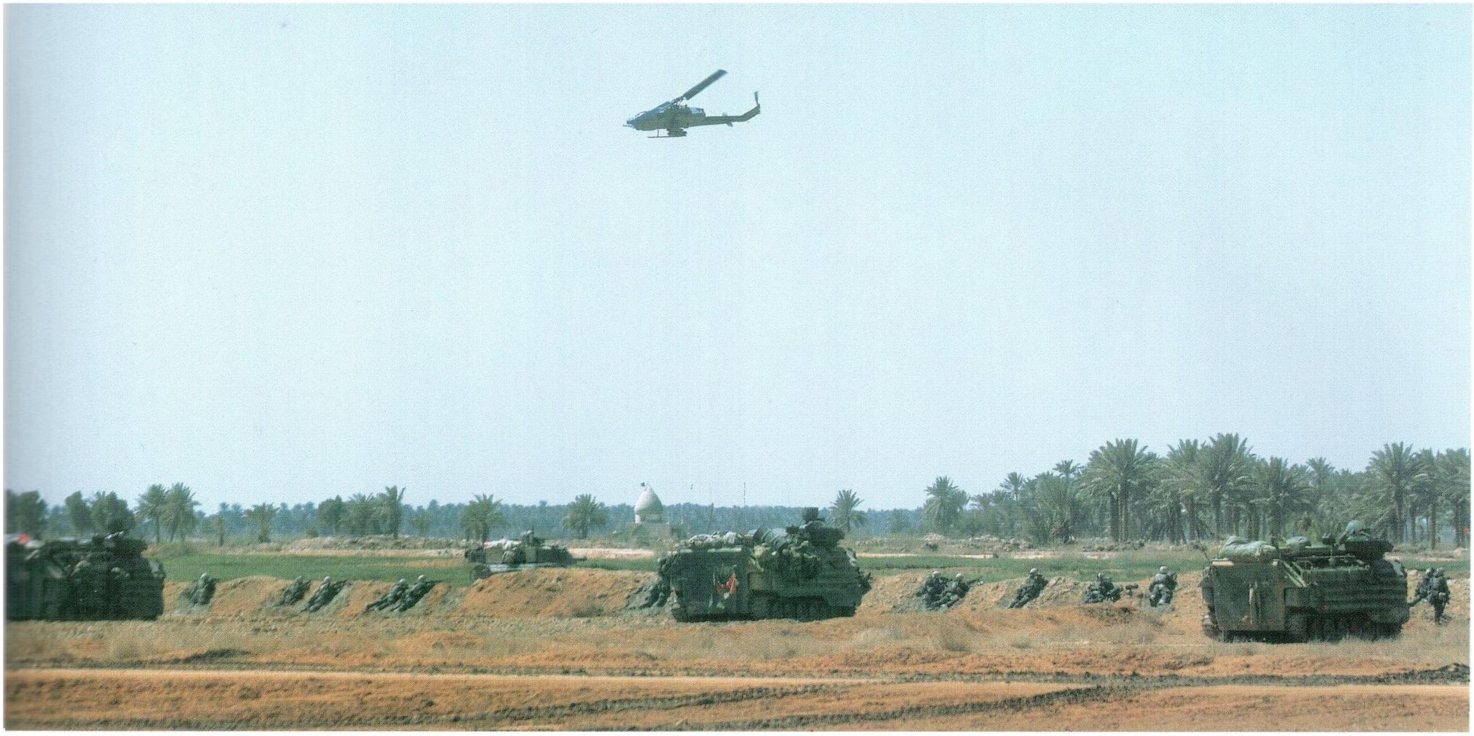


A Marine sniper perches atop an AAV-7A1 as he uses his talents to suppress the attack on his company. This position is not the most ideal for achieving accuracy.

More sniper teams spread out around the Amtrac to combat the Iraqi ambush.



Following a minor collision on the highway during the ambush, an AH-1W Cobra helicopter came at once to support the Marines.



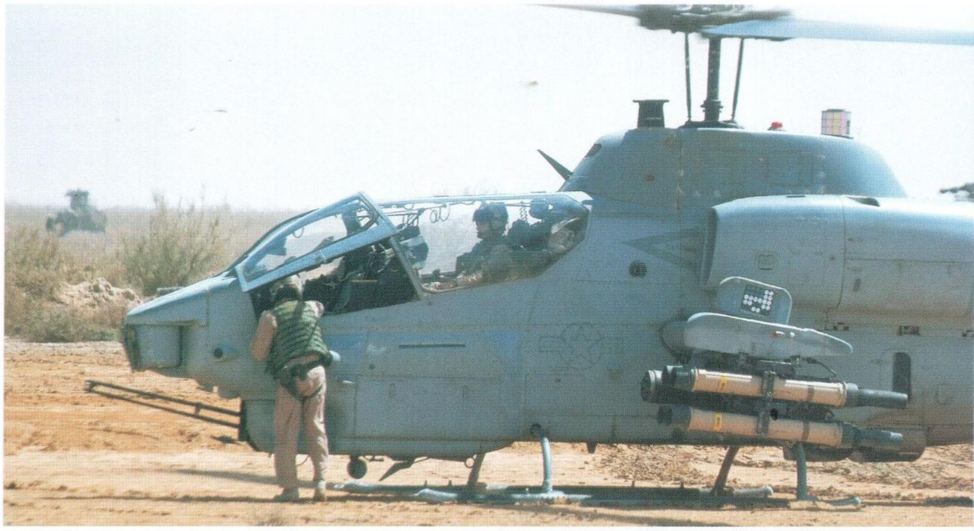
A Cobra helicopter circleas above the advancing column of Marines, looking for a target or an opportunity to assist the troops below.

After being turned back by the MPs, I used the sandstorm of the next day to infiltrate. For five days I was at the front with the lead elements. A majority of the Marines are friendly and take care of me. On the 27th I take a few pictures of the ambush and the withdrawal. At 1800, I am back at the Diwaniyah crossroad. Some fire can be seen in the town. I see a large number of troops preparing to pull back, which makes me worry since I could not stay alone without NVG in a military column. The Iraqis could capture me. A very kind major invites me to spend the night 500 meters behind its mortar unit. "If the Iraqi tanks advance," he says, "you'll be in the middle of the action." I sleep with the supply company of the 1st Marine Tank Battalion. I make some soup for the Marines, peeling an onion with no difficulty by the light of illumination flares.

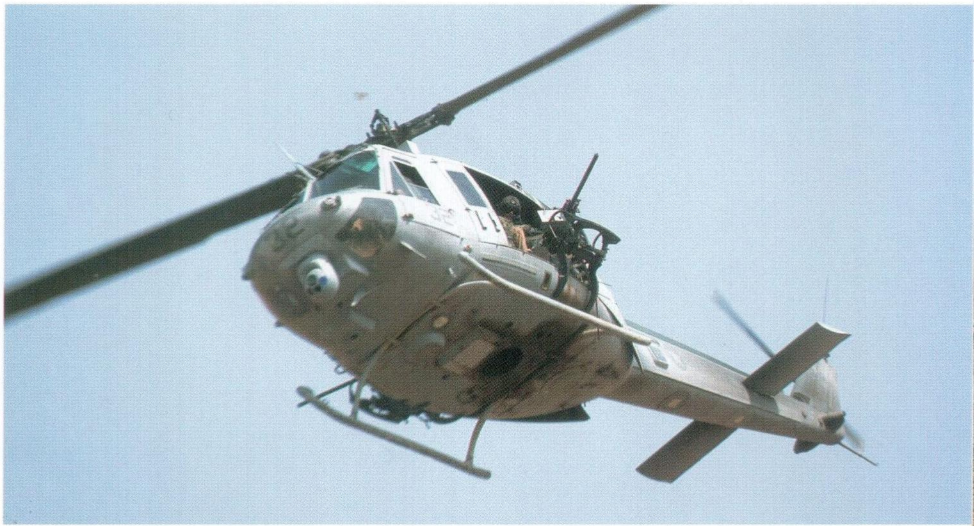
On 28 March, I take inventory:
Food: OK for one week
Water: OK, but be careful
Fuel: It should be OK until Baghdad

Some embedded journalists give me news. The 1/5 and 3/5 Marines behind us were in a serious skirmish. That explains the withdrawal. Two Marines were wounded by friendly artillery fire. Near Basra, an American mistakenly killed a journalist of ITN TV. It is reported that upon learning this news, General Frank said that all non-embedded journalists should be considered as the enemy.

29 March. For the first time in seven days, I shave (sacrificing a bottle of French mineral water), doing so while an 81mm mortar fires to secure the perimeter in front of the M-1A1



This photograph, which was taken at a different time and some distance from the ambush, shows an AH-1W Cobra preparing for a combat mission.



The advance column of a Marine Regimental Combat Team is almost systematically overflown by a couple of UH-1N choppers that are used both as a gunship and a means of command and close recognition.

After a few hours of skirmishing, the lead column of the MEF turned back and returned to Diwaniyah. This tactical withdrawal was probably due to some Iraqi attacks in the rear.

tanks. (I can tell you that it takes a real talent to shave oneself using Evian water in the middle of the desert with the sound of artillery in the background.)

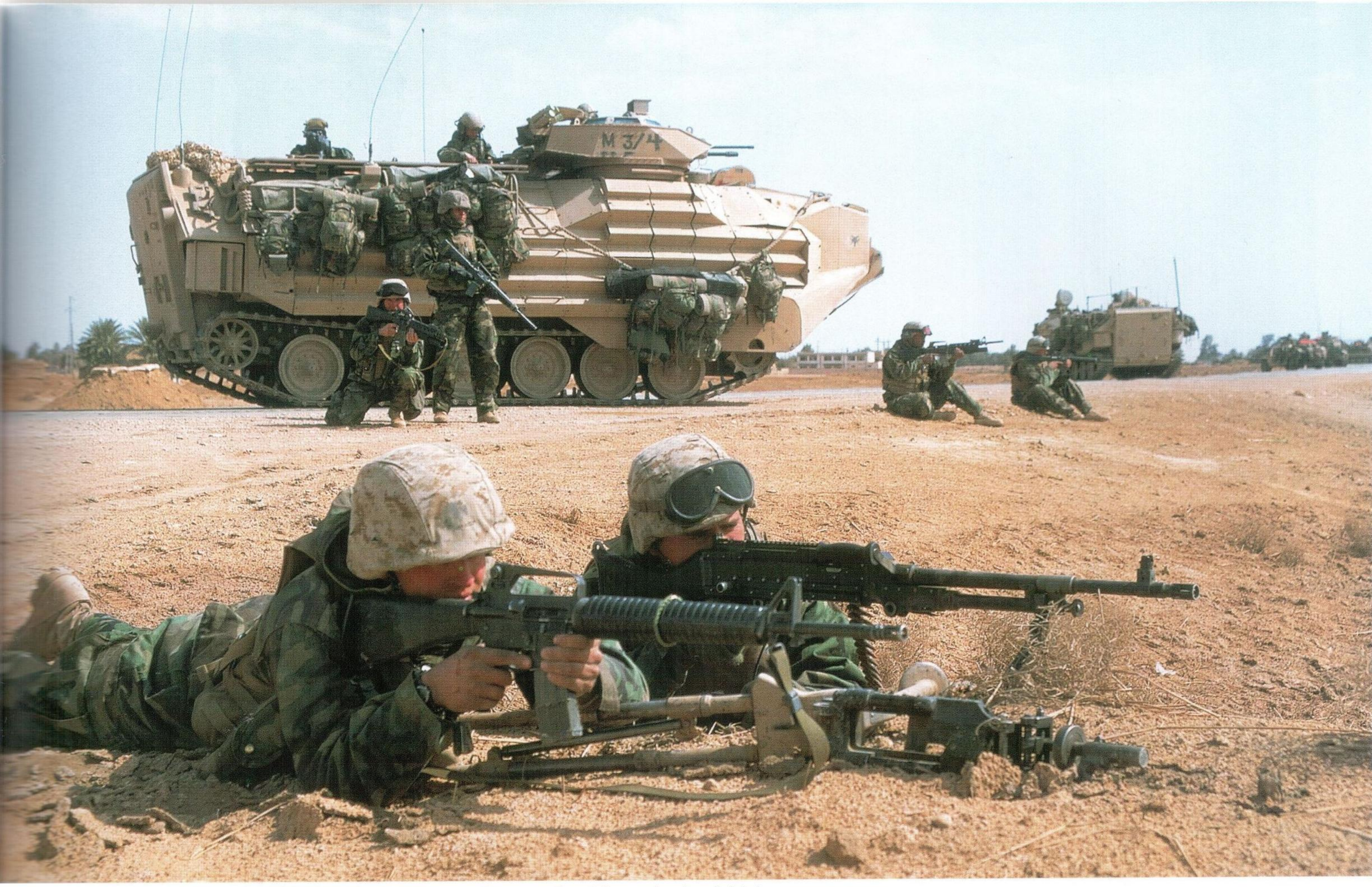
During the day, I spend time with the 3/4 Marines as they launch a raid near Afak. At that small city I speak with an agitated Iraqi civilian. To calm him down, a Marine perched on an Amtrac fires two warning shots that pass between us.

During the night, several gas alarms are sounded. "Gas! Gas! Gas!" yell the Marines as they hurriedly put on their gas masks. Since I don't have one I simply turn over in my sleeping bag to find a more comfortable position. If it had been a real gas attack, I would have already been dead.

30 March. I spend part of the day with an Arab interpreter searching for fresh eggs in an abandoned farm used by the Iraqi territorial forces. During the night, a few Iraqi 120-mm mortar rounds fall near the crossroads. The response from the US battery is immediate

Afak

Along its way, the Regimental Combat Team of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines of the 1st Marine Division made a brief stop in the city of Afak. Note the UH-1N flying over the column.



Mike Company of the 3/4 Marines took up a position south of the suburb of Afak.

At dawn on 29 March, a Regimental Combat Team of the 3/4 Marines launched a raid on Al Tahir, an administrative center and small garrison town between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The purpose of the raid was doubtless to assure the security of the right flank of the 1st MEF after the skirmishes of the previous days. The road passes by the city of Afak, about thirty kilometers east of Diwaniyah. Afak was only a stop-off point and the Marines did not capture the city. They were content to ensure the safety of the forces passing to the south of the city. The operation offered the Marines a test in handling civilians during wartime.

A photograph serves as an historic record of the Marine armored column's arrival at the outskirts of the city of Afak.

As the column approached their town, a number of civilians from Afak, among them children and teenagers, were heading down the highway. As was the case in most of the Iraqi cities, these civilians were relieved that the fighting would not harm their homes. As some of the civilians approached the Marines to find out the latest news, troops in an AAV-7A1 pulled up, exited the vehicle and took up defensive positions. A voice from a Humvee with speakers asked the people to return to their homes. Apparently not understanding, some of the civilians ignored the plea and approached to greet the US troops. In an understandable step to protect themselves from possible suicide attacks, the Marines fired warning shots at the feet of the civilians. The Marines have learned that the difficulties facing the coalition forces can make it tougher to win the hearts of the people.

Marines of the 3/4 Marines take aim with their M-16A1 and an M-240 machine gun on a bipod, ready to use them against any assault. Numerous warning shots were fired at the civilians as they approached the column.

"Leathernecks" patrol on the outskirts of the town of Afak. Their central European camouflage battle dress uniforms and desert tan helmets characterized their appearance on the way to Baghdad.

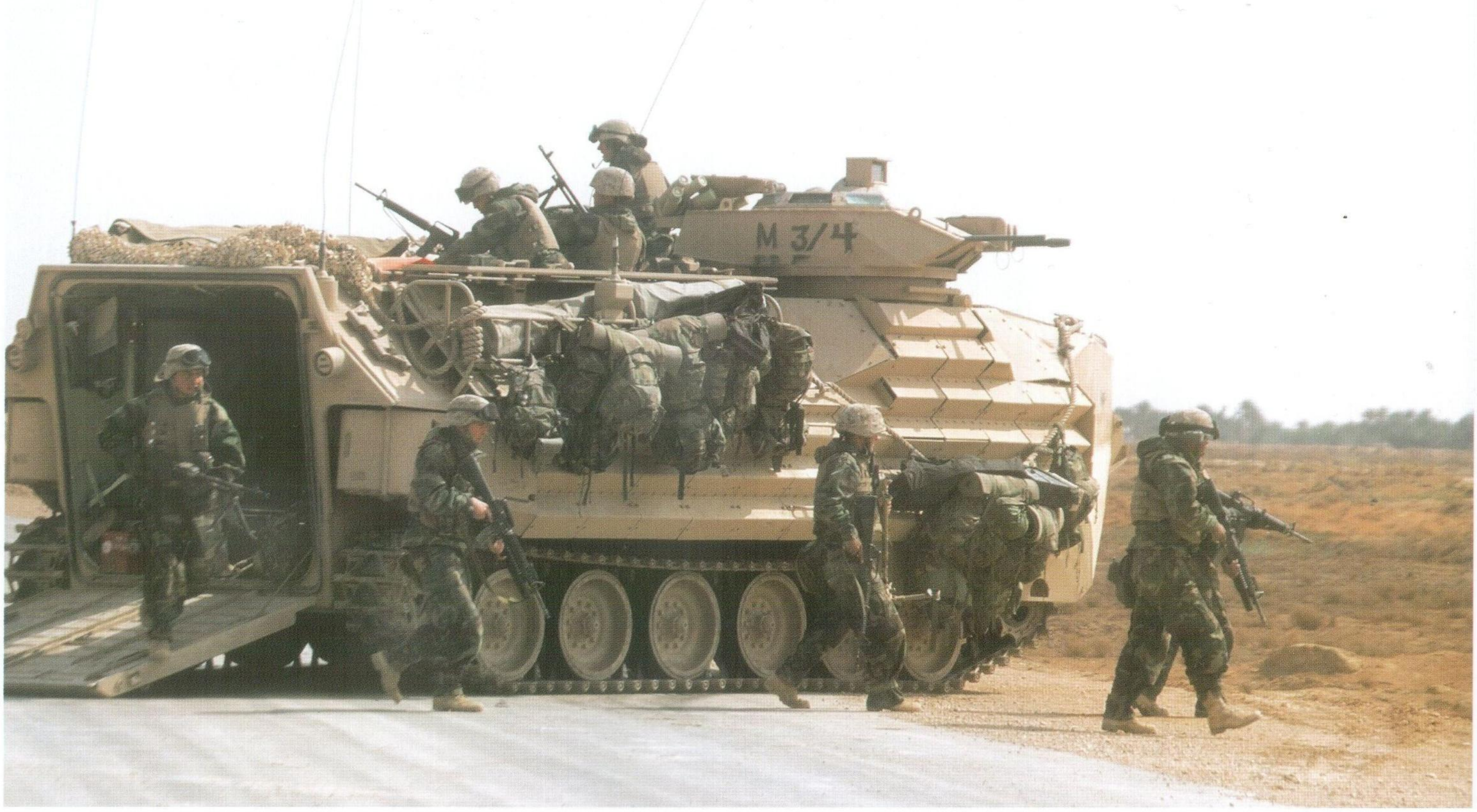
Troopers of the 3/4 Marines cautiously exit their AAV-7A1. Note the personal equipment hanging on the sides of the Amtrac. When soldiers are compelled to live in a cramped space such as the interior of a combat compartment of an armored vehicle, it is important that everything has its appropriate place and that the order is scrupulously respected.

Marines take up prone defensive positions alongside the road near Afak.

This view looking toward the road near Afak shows Amtracs and trucks from the 1st MEF at a halt. In the foreground, a Marine remains alert against possible attack.

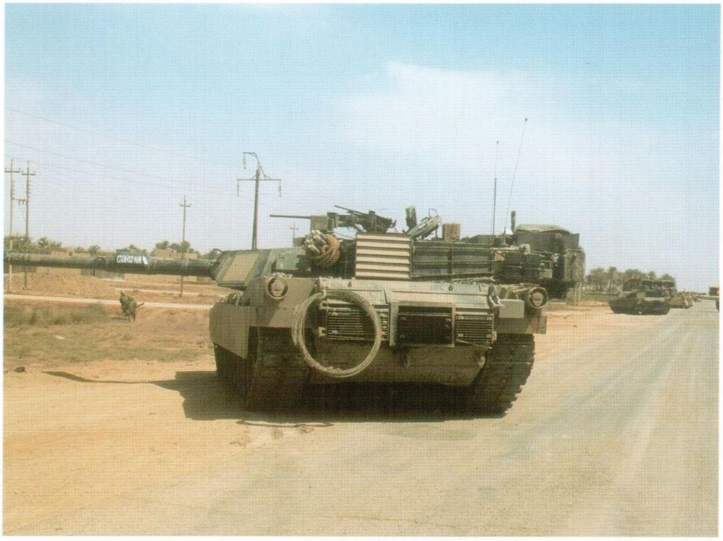
With some desert greenery screening him from view, a Marine demonstrates the correct kneeling position when guarding his Amtrack during a stop near Afak.

Two Marines take up defensive positions during the advance near Afak. One crouches behind a rise in the terrain; the other kneels behind the blade of a bulldozer.

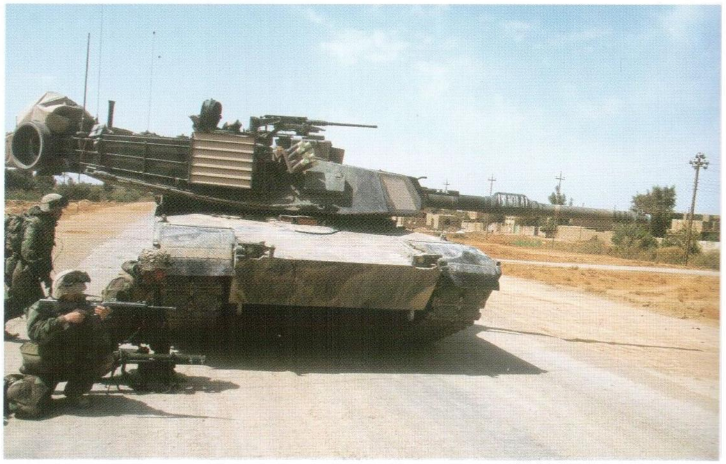


This close-up view of Marines from the 3/4 Marines exiting an AAV-7A1 provides some good detail that modelers may find useful. Note the marking "M 3/4" on the turret.

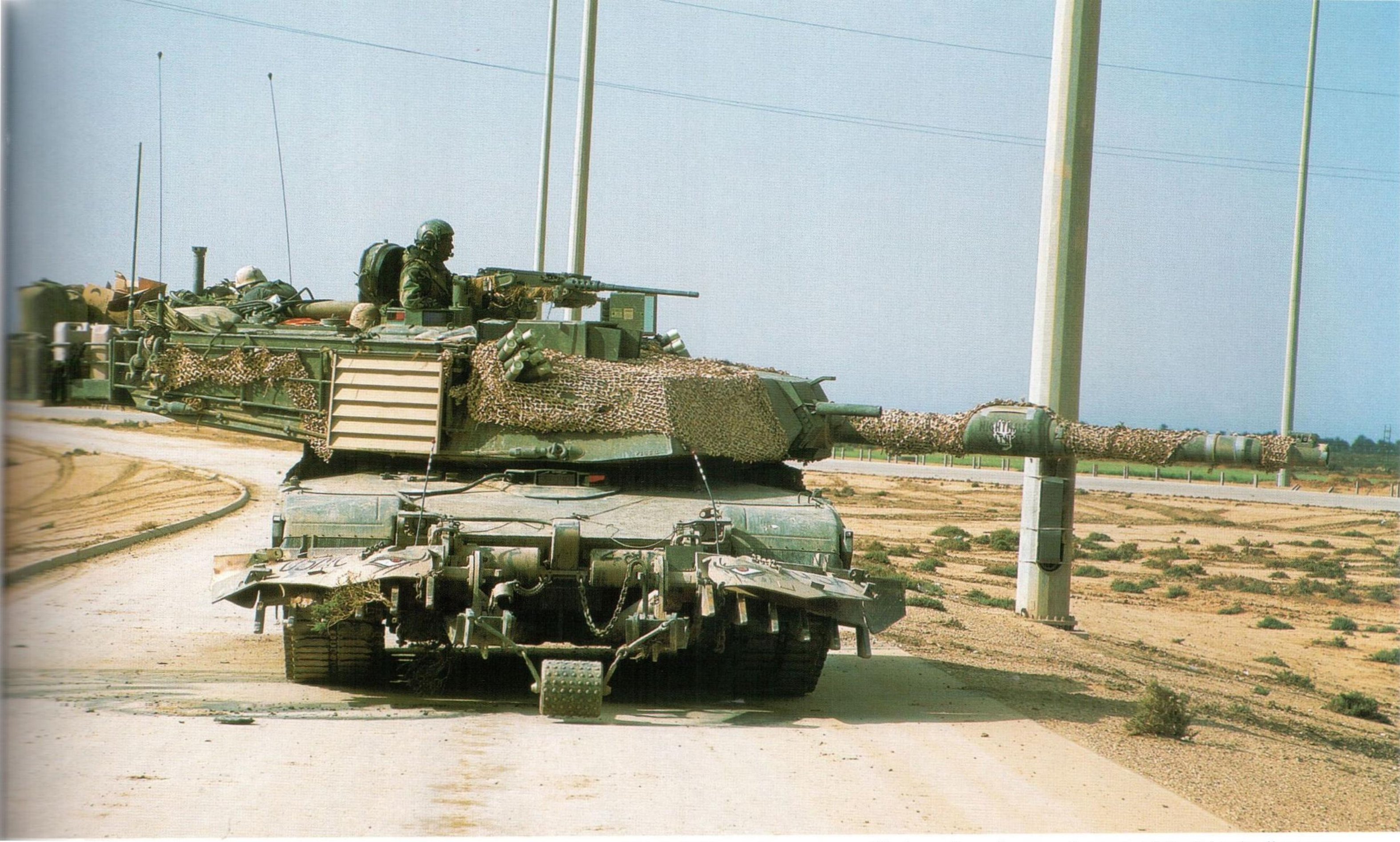
The simple trip to Afak turned out to be a questionable show of force since the hostile Iraqis had already left Afak behind as an open city. The lack of food and electricity, and the scarcity of food, all combined to upset the population, who blamed the American forces for their woes. Since the end of the conventional fighting, efforts have been made to restore electricity and water to the populace and to provide the Iraqi people with necessary provisions.



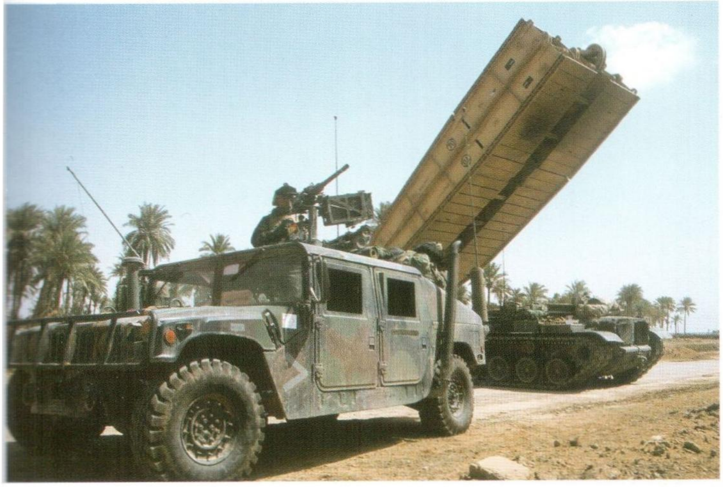
An M-1A1 named "Corona" provides support for the Marines near Afak.



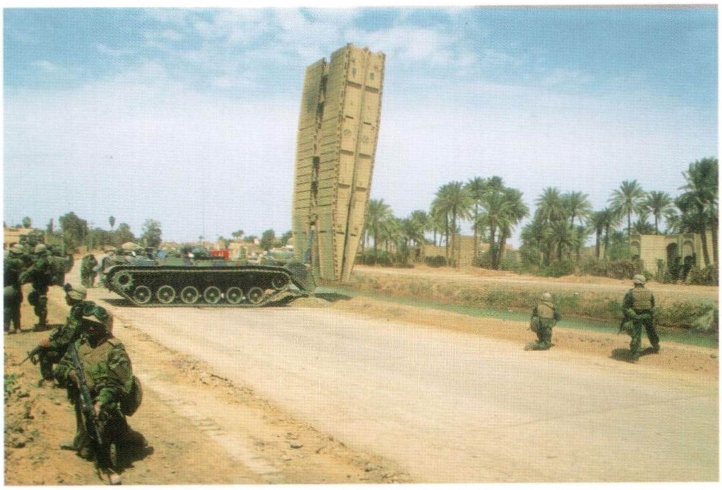
This M-1A1 has been christened with the name "Blackula," and the protective tube around the coaxial machine gun bears the size designation "XXL." The Marine kneeling in front of the tank is armed with a SMAW, a rocket launcher of Israeli origin that is used by the USMC for street fighting.



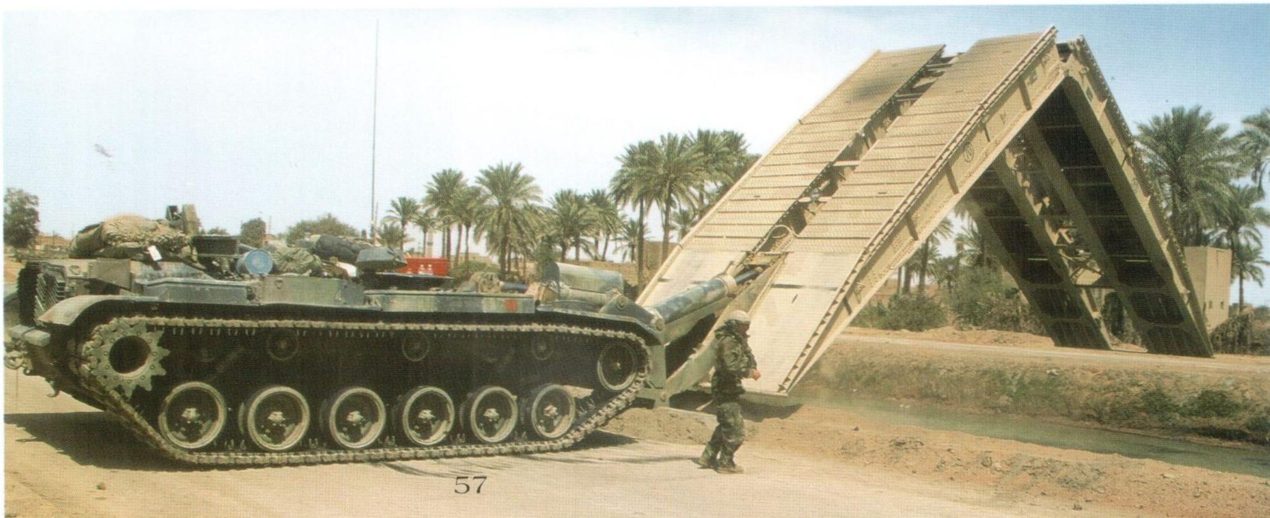
A tank in the M-1A1 platoon turns its gun in the direction of Afak. With such names as "Cojones" on the gun barrels of their tanks, it seems the men of the tank unit are "Latinos."



During the move on Afak, the Marines took the opportunity to put the combat engineers to work under battlefield conditions.



Despite the existence of a civilian bridge, the Marines decided to put the bridge-laying tank to use.



Serving only as a footnote to history, the armored bridge was retracted when it was found to be too short fot the job. In the end, the column of US vehicles used the civilian bridge, which the Iraqi forces failed to blow up or mine.

Raid on Al Tahir

When several lead units of the Marine column converged on the center of town at the same time, a certain amount of confusion reigned, giving the impression that everybody was giving orders at the same time.

At 1400, 29 March, the Regimental Combat Team of the 3/4 Marines arrived at the suburb of Al Tahir. The column of troops included:

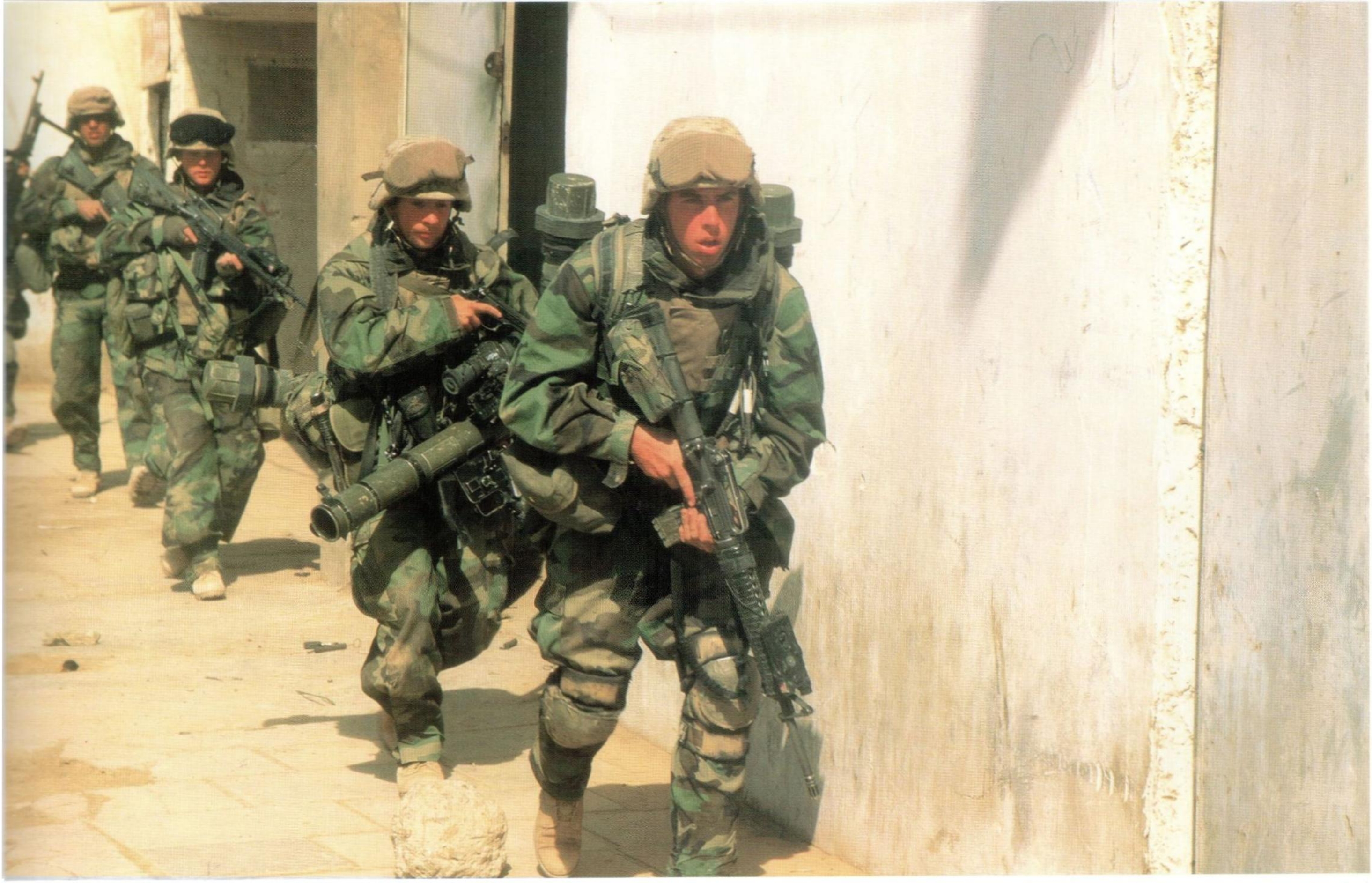
- 12 M-1A1 tanks of the 1st Marine Tank Battalion;
- Companies I, K, M of the 3/4 Marines with 24 Amtracs (3 Command Amtracs, 12 TOW and .50-caliber Humvees);
- Engineer platoon with 2 M-9 ACEs, 2 M-60 (bridgelayer) and 2 AAV-7A1s;
- 2 Fuchs;
- 1 LAV ECM;
- 6 Humvees (one with speakers);
- 2 M-88s.

This armada swept down on the small village of Al Tahir. Some troops surrounded the town and others ventured into the village. A barracks building, a small power plant and some workshops were left intact. The presence of four unfortunate policemen in green uniforms and armed with their issue Kalashnikovs provoked a disproportionate response from the US forces. The Marines began an impressive street sweeping operation, firing weapons for what seemed to the author to be no major reason and sending a SMAW rocket into a window. Temporary confusion reigned when several units converged in the center of town. Another building was destroyed with explosives while the policemen were unceremoniously interrogated.

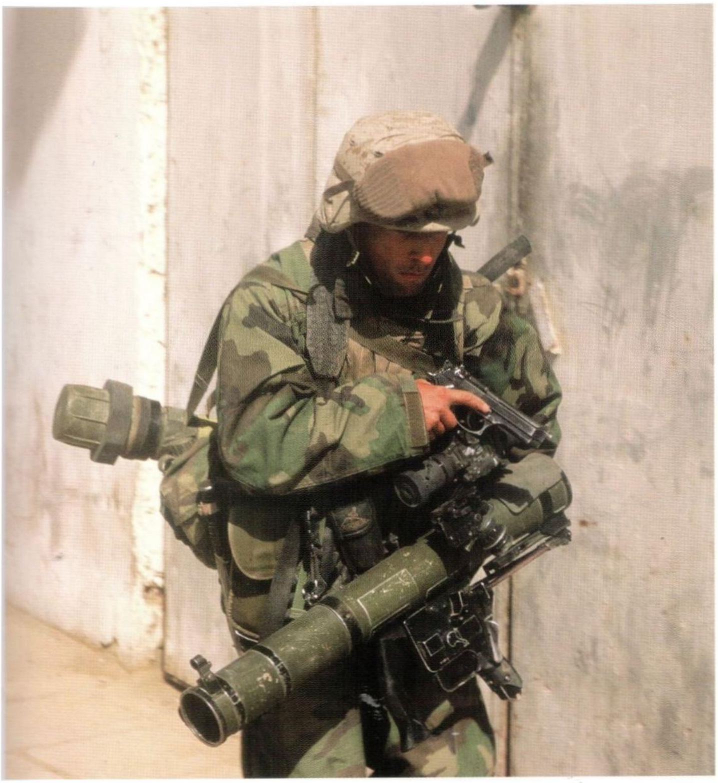
Some of the town's inhabitants became bolder and asked, through the assistance of the interpreters, if the water and electricity could be restored, but they only received vague promises. The Marines did distribute some humanitarian rations in yellow packages, a kind gesture that provoked fighting.

At 1600, the entire column was mustered. At the outskirts of town, troops open fire, riddling wall-sized frescoes of Saddam Hussein. On a bench in the center of town, two little old men who did not move during the entire operation must have wondered what all the commotion had been about.

Troopers of the 3/4 Marines take up a position along a low wall at the exit to Al Tahir. They are armed with an M-16, an M-4 Carbine and a SMAW. The second soldier from the right carries a harness with supplementary rockets for the SMAW. This Israeli-made weapon, which is used during urban combat, can fire an 83mm rocket 400 meters. There are six of them within a support platoon.

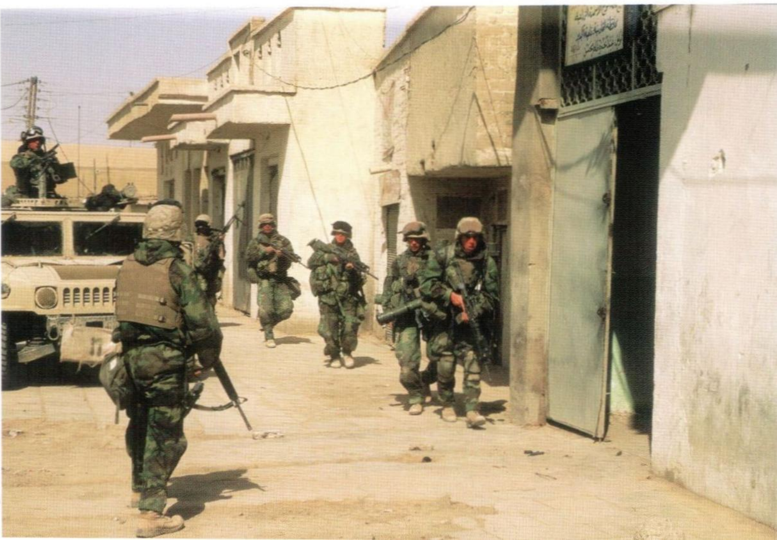


"Leathernecks" exercise caution as they enter into the center of town. With their fingers on the trigger, they can send bursts flying at the first hint of a noise.

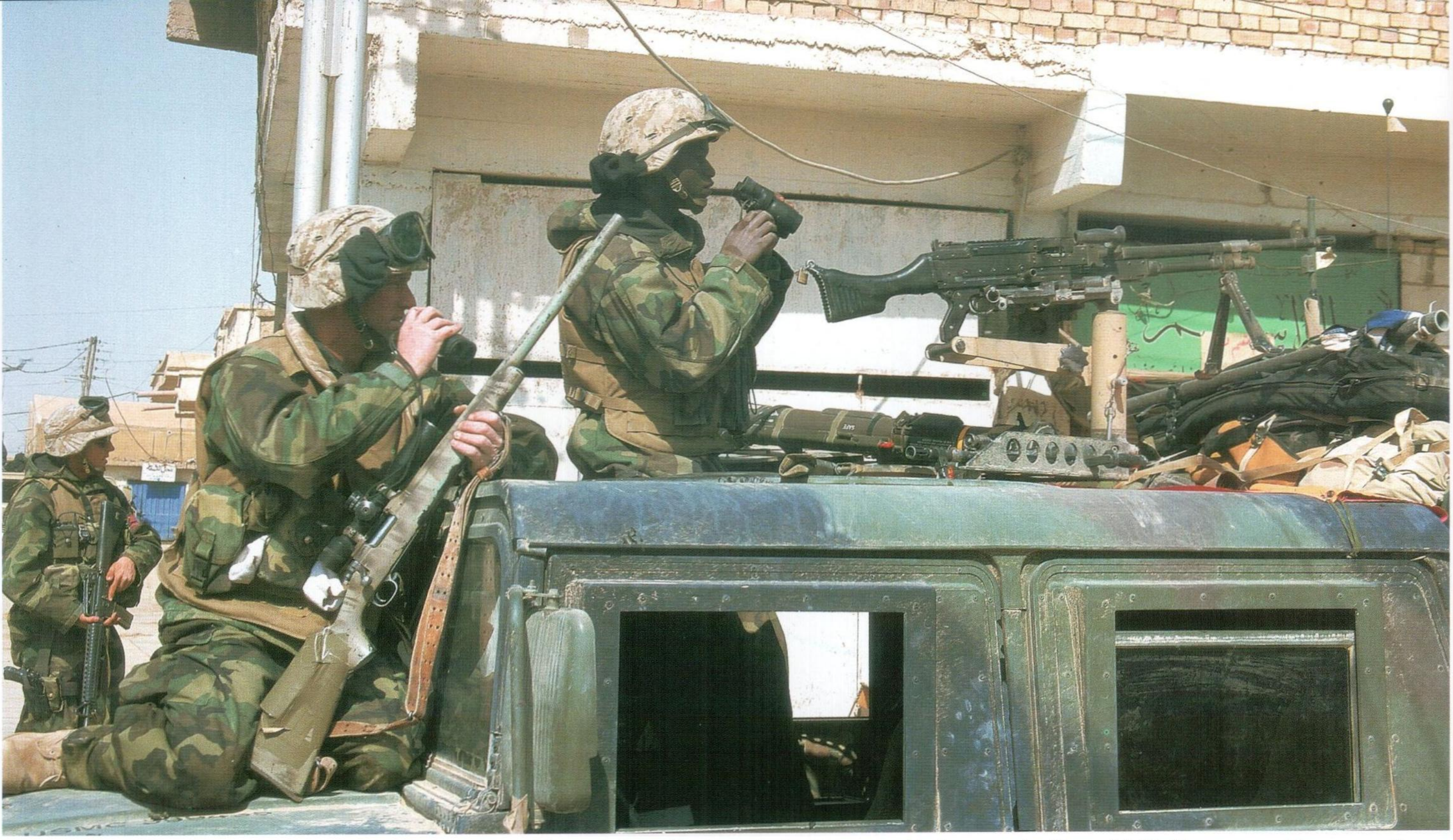


The squad member carrying the SMAW is armed with a Beretta. The pistol could cause him to lose precious seconds if he needed to put the tube into operation in a hurry.

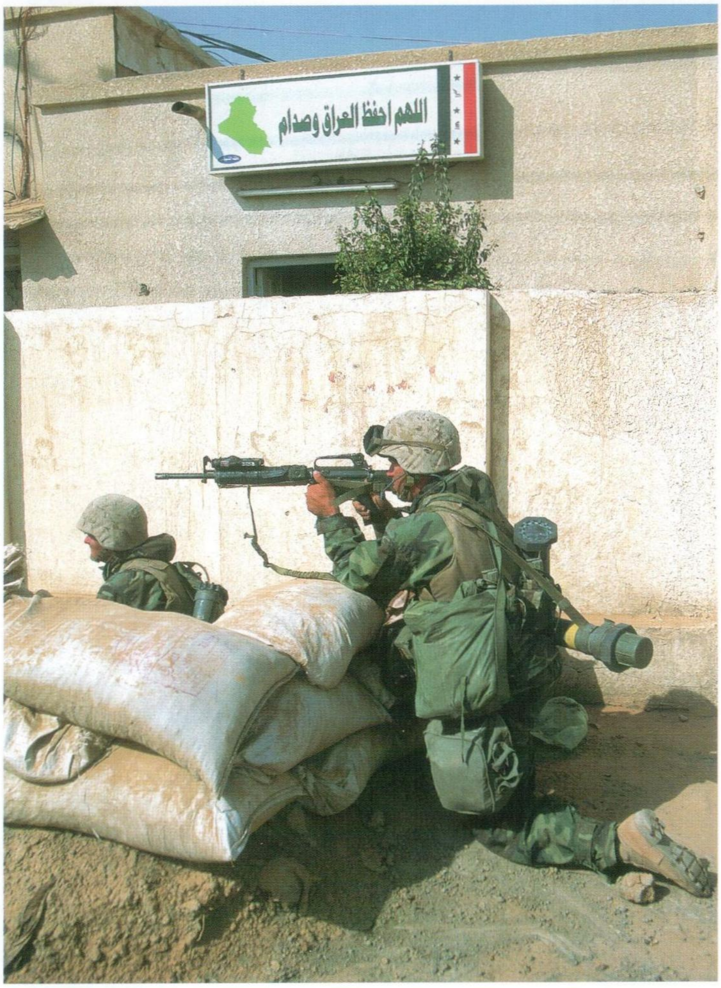
As they approach the center of the town of Al Tahir, the Marines take extra care to spot hostile gunmen.



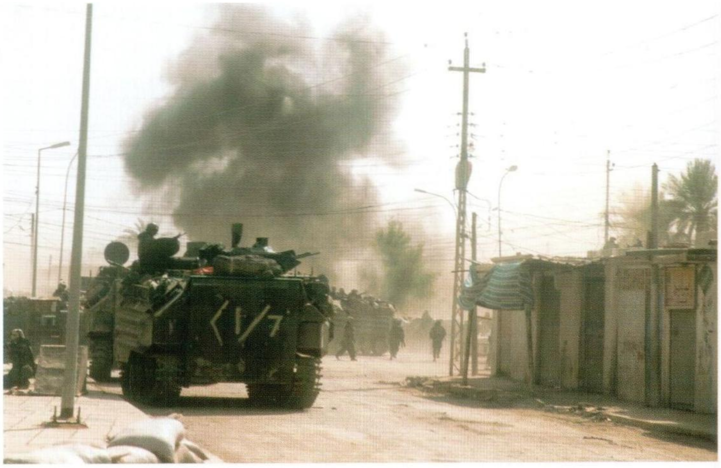
This photograph of Marines advancing through Al Tahir provides a good study of the appearance of combat Marines during Operation "Iraqi Freedom."



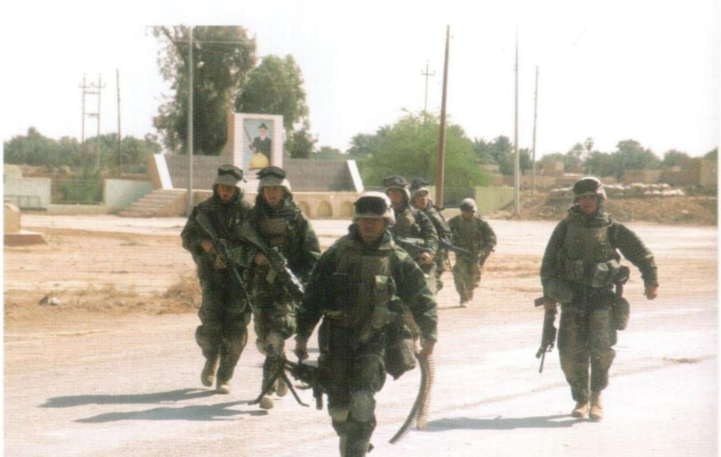
The sniper shown here has decided to carry out his work from the hood of a Hummer. He is armed with an M-40 rifle covered in camouflage. The use of a sniper is more discreet and doubtless more effective in this kind of operation than the display of an entire company that is firing without exercising proper judgment.



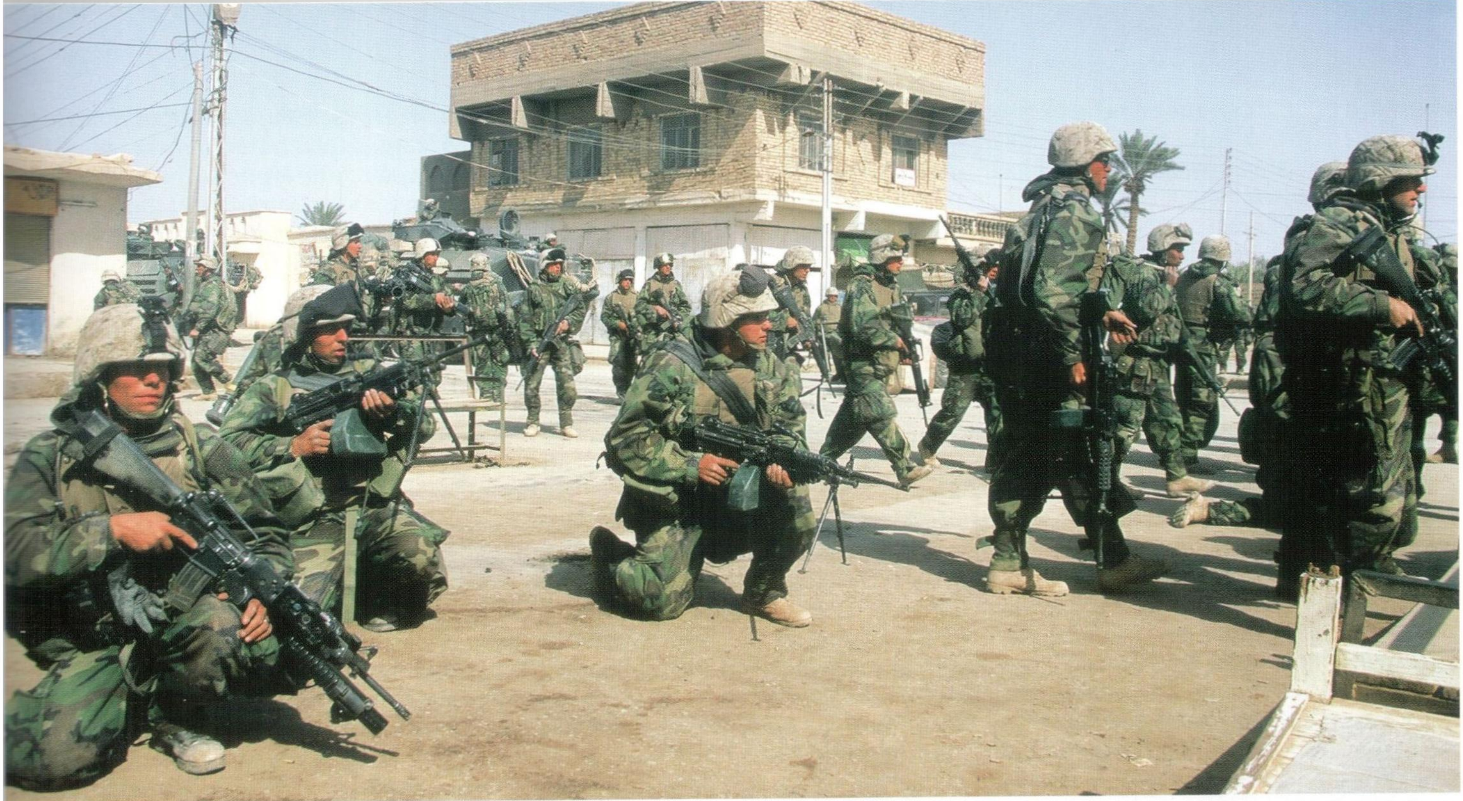
A Marine goes into position behind some sandbags outside an official building. The writing on the placard at the top of the photo says, "May Allah Protect Iraq and Saddam."



The Marines blow up an official building, probably a police station or the site of the Baath Party.



A more manageable number of Marines make their way through Al Tahir. Note the portrait of Saddam Hussein in the background.



This large group of Marines is an impressive collection of fighting men, but the photo shows that they are dangerously bunched up. A single hand grenade dropped from a roof could result in many of them being killed or wounded. Fifty meters from the spot where they are gathered, two streets were left empty, completely without surveillance. In Beirut, this error would have proved to be a lethal one.

Encounter with the MP and Fedayeen

31 March

The 2/5 Marines form into a column and the advance begins again. I follow the LAV for 32 kilometers. From the roof of one of the vehicles that carries an embedded journalist, the vehicle commander gives me an insulting gesture with this finger before turning northward. Apparently, the MEF changed direction and turned northeast to avoid a concentration of the Republican Guard south of Baghdad.

Some kilometers further north, not far from the location of the ambush on 27 March, a NCO arrests me and asks for my identification. Two minutes later, two Humvee TOW vehicles escort me to the regimental command post at a service station that is under construction. At the same time, I see two CH-46 Sea Knights land, and one of them unloads TV equipment (no doubt Fox TV). The PIO (Public Information Officer or Press Officer), a lieutenant with a shaved skull, interrogates me. Two of his men begin to search my car under my supervision. I am in a rotten mood, but I declare politely but firmly that it is out of the question for me to head back south. "Shaved Skull" says to me, "No option." That is all he knows how to say. He places an armed sentry in front of my car. It is impossible for me to proceed because vehicles and helicopters are in front of and behind me. The sentry would have all kinds of time to shoot at me if I tried anything. If I did escape, it would be impossible for me to continue on the march with the MEF.

I decide to try another plan. I try to speak with the lieutenant, but he pretends not to understand anything. So, I write down a message on a sheet of paper.

"I accept the words 'compromise' and 'deal,'" I write. "I do not accept the words, 'No Option.' I do not have enough fuel to go back south! If you try to take me south, it will be by force and I will resist!"

Three hours later, two Humvees from the Military Police arrive. A tall captain gets out. A non-commissioned officer and three MPs accompany him. One of them carries plastic wrist restraints like the ones I became familiar with during my experience in Kuwait. After a brief consultation with Lieutenant "Shaved Skull," they head toward my vehicle.

"Get out and follow me," I am told. "We will escort you to the HQ."

I know very well that the HQ of the 1st MEF is situated 80 kilometers to the south, a 160-kilometer round trip. That would use up half of the fuel I have left. It is out of the question to go there. I tell them I do not have enough fuel and that my assignment is to go to Baghdad, not to the south.

"Get out now or we will use force!" the angry captain tells me.

"Do you know your American military history?" I ask. "NUTS! General MacAuliffe, Bastogne, 1944," I add.

Irritated by my answer, they open the door and pull me out. When I fall to the ground, they drag me. The MP wants to secure my wrists without getting hit, but I resist with all the energy of one who is desperate. The NCO tries to sit on me, but he falls to the ground. Several times I turn around violently and confuse them. A big MP with glasses kicks me in the ribs and back. (If I could fight him alone, I would overpower him in no time, but not when the odds are five to one.) The violent but hopeless fight continues.

They finally manage to seize my arms to put the restraints on my wrists. The second MP puts one of his boots in my face, *smashing my ear into the cement, but I continue to resist.*

"Damn, this bastard is strong," says the NCO.

I yell to the captain, "It's easy to kick a man when he's on the ground."

The officer, who has been watching the conflict, understands the message and stops the MP who was doing the kicking. Nevertheless, the fight continues. It takes them ten minutes to secure my wrists. The moment I feel the plastic on my flesh, I give out a yell, not from pain (I know how to control myself), but to surprise them. It works, and I loosen the restraint. They have to begin all over again. The boot is still on my head and I am starting to lose my breath. I resist for one minute more, for honor's sake, and then they secure my wrists again.

It has taken them twenty minutes to subdue me. In the eyes of the NCO, I read a mixture of admiration and incredulity, as if he were wondering why a French reporter would resist so tenaciously against the five of them and the system. If I had wished to respond, I would have told him that the place for a war correspondent is on the front line.

The captain asks me if everything is OK.

"I don't have anything to say," I respond. "I was only doing my job." Referring to the MP who kicked me, I add, "If I had [him] in front of me, I would demolish him in less than a minute."

After that exchange, I take refuge in silence, satisfying myself with occasionally giving the "evil eye" to the kick-happy MP, who sheepishly asks me repeatedly if everything is all right. I do not answer.

They settle into their Humvee and we depart. The road is a cavalry for me. The wrist links dig into my flesh with every bump, my back is hurting, and blood is streaming from my ears and forehead. My car, which is being driven by another MP, follows us.

After we stop at the command post, I still refuse to speak. A young soldier approaches and points to his corporal insignia, which bears the badge of a physician. He is a Navy medic (the USMC has no medical personnel). He wants to clean my wounds, but I turn away. I want to show up at division in the condition I am in. For me, the fight continues, and this gesture will not shake my determination. Five minutes later, the medic returns and gently cleans up the blood. Fastened as I was, I could only let him work.

Soon I am placed in the passenger seat of my car, my hands secured behind my back. We head straight south. A Humvee follows behind carrying the sergeant who participated in the fight. During the night, the convoy uses night vision goggles to continue the trip. The lights of the dashboard dazzle my driver, a 21-year-old from New Orleans who tries to console me.

The end of my journey is torture. I sink into a sort of lethargy, interrupted by a painful alarm clock; as we jostle along, my head occasionally hits the dashboard. At about 2030 we arrive at division HQ.

I am still bound when they remove me from my car. At the HQ, one of the local MPs tries to raise my spirits, but I rudely tell him to "f - - - off." His colleague, who is funnier, asks me if I am covering the Tour de France (the famous bicycle race in France). That amusing question in the middle of the desert and in such an unpleasant situation takes me totally by surprise and it elicits roars of laughter. It is fortunate there are people like him.

The PIO arrives. He is a tall captain armed with a riot gun, an excellent weapon for communicating with a journalist. He does not seem to be a man of good humor, and his welcoming speech did nothing to change my opinion.

"Here," he says, "there are three types of people: Marines, embedded journalists and bad guys. You do not fall into any of these categories, so tomorrow I am sending you back to Kuwait."

My answer erupts from within me. "You have no official or international right to arrest me," I allege. "Iraq is still a sovereign country. I have no reason to obey you." I add, "If you send me to Kuwait, it will be by force and I will resist. You saw the condition of my face. It will be ten times worse, and I guarantee to give a press conference, even if it's from a hospital bed. Furthermore, you will need at least ten Marines to watch me, because I make no guarantee not to escape. Ten MPs are ten men not on the front line because of some stupid mission."

The captain seethes. Tension is rising and it looks like the making of a Franco-American confrontation. Suddenly, the staff sergeant, the second-in-command to the officer (who up to now has kept silent), asks me for my name. I give it to him.

"Yves! Yves Debay!" he shouts. "Do you remember me? Staff Sergeant Jamisson. Canjeurs in 1996 with the 22nd MEU."

I discover I have run into a former PIO who arranged for me to visit the USMC units in Canjeurs, the French Army practice range in the south of France. After viewing M-1s and Amtracs on the shooting range, I had invited him and some other Marines to a very French restaurant.

At Jamisson's request, I am at once unbound and conversation begins again on a more courteous level. I remain detained, but tomorrow will be another day.

1 April
I wait all morning long. Jamisson has the keys to my car. I come across a journalist for the "Soir" from Brussels and two other "wildcats." They say they have been there for seven days. I learn that some other photographers have been in the area, but that I was the one that made it farthest north. Jamisson tells me that he is going to try to get me embedded, but that it will take some time. A medevac Black Hawk takes off, and I know that some fighting has taken place while I was detained.

2 April
During the night, the CP of the MEF begins to move. At dawn, Staff Sergeant Jamisson returns my keys to me.

"It's going to be the last fighting before Baghdad," he says. "Sorry there's no time to get you embedded." He tells me that I'm free and wishes me good luck. He also cautions: "Stay away from the MPs and the staff of the 5th Marines."

Even Captain Prezer, the large PIO with the riot gun, comes to say good-bye. Not vindictive, he tells me: "Keep your head down!" I sense that behind his Ray Ban sunglasses he has a friendly look, and I hear sympathy in his voice. We shake hands. After all, even though he is completely wrong about specialist publications, the big guy was only doing his job.

All of the MEF is on the road, so I travel along side of it. A Seabee stops me at 1100, then twenty minutes later a particularly mean captain, who would do better to build his pontoon bridges than to bother people, hassles me.

The traffic jam is monstrous. The Baghdad-Basra highway is worse than Rivoli Street on Friday at 1700. The convoy passes by in an endless stream of vehicles, one every three seconds. Finally, I manage to join the lead column.

Every Amtrac in the world seems to have converged at Daghala, and all of them are heading northeast. When a kind captain from the 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalion greets me, I point out to him that the long stream of vehicles is following in the history of the Mongols and the Turkish Janissaries. He replies simply: "I don't know about that, but I do know that the Bible foresaw an American victory."

To reach the Tigris, it is necessary to pass by Saddam Canal, and there is only one bridge leading to it. Guarding the bridge are two Humvees with .50-caliber MGs and an MP sergeant. It is impossible to pass. The sergeant keeps his eye on me. I try to move up a few meters as the convoy passes, but the MP sees me. If I wanted to cross now, I would have to force my way over. As the convoy carrying the other journalists passes by, the MP smiles a sadistic grin that reveals yellow teeth under a scraggly moustache, and he prevents me from passing. After all, I am not "embedded." With rage in my heart, I watch the 4x4 with the journalists disappear into the dust kicked up by the tracked vehicles of the 3/4 Marines.

It seems profoundly unfair.

3 April

Despite the promises of the day before, the MP does not allow me to pass over the bridge. I am promised an escort later in the morning, but nothing comes. I have now been stuck in front of this damned bridge for 12 hours. At 1030 I create a diversion. I hoist French flags on my car and get onto the path that follows the Saddam Canal to try to find a place to cross. Ahead of me I see Iraqi civilians waiving weapons. There is nothing north of me but Saddam's soldiers, so I turn around and go south.

The path running along the Saddam Canal is not too bad. Swimming in the canal are several young men who, considering their ages, could be deserters from the Iraqi army. Twenty kilometers further, the path is not in good shape. The salty crust on top of it has collapsed and I get horribly stuck in the mud near a bypass channel. On the other side of the bank is desert. The shimmering air caused by the heat creates imaginary lakes on the horizon. My back wheel is only centimeters from the canal. No help is in sight; I have to manage it alone.

It is midday and the temperature is at least 35°C (95°F). I try to dig my car out, but every scoop of the shovel is torture. The heavy Mesopotamian earth weighs a ton. Stars dance before my eyes as my strength fails me and I find myself on the verge of despair. Though I risk dying alone, I have no choice. The place for a war correspondent is on the front line. Finally, by emptying everything from the vehicle, I achieve success. My car is out of the mud! It now seems impractical to head south, so I am forced to return to the bridge. The troops of the US Engineers welcome me "the American way" by pointing their M-16s at my Daihatsu. The grinning MP has disappeared, but his lieutenant, who had previously reneged on his promises to me, still does not allow me to cross. I then decide to make a detour to the south.

According to the radio, there are coalition troops at Al Kut. I return to Daghala and take the road to Afak. At the first village, I ask for directions. The crowd gathered around my car draws the attention of two policemen. Without any violence, I am taken to the police station while a man stands watch over my car. In the main room, about ten people sitting under a portrait of Saddam Hussein stare at me in total surprise. Words I learned during the first Gulf War came to my mind and I repeat them: Franci Saafi, Franci Saafi *(French journalist). They are in total disbelief when I show them the wound on my face from my "meeting" with the MPs. They break into laughter when I say I want to go to Kut. One of them offers me tea.*

The leader of the police, who bears the rank of major on the shoulder strap of his green uniform, gives me back my keys and invites me to follow a small car. Four people with weapons climb into the car, and a fifth settles in by my side. One of the fellows that gets into the car is a Fedayeen. His attitude reminds me of the mujahadeen *in Afghanistan. He is big, with an eagle face that is adorned with the traditional moustache, and he wears a black and white* keffieh, *leather cartridge pouch belt, and he carries a Kalashnikov. He is a little lightly equipped to fight a company of Amtracs, but he makes an imposing presence!*

After half an hour, we arrive at Diwaniyah. In the middle of the street my escort hands me over to some men with moustaches. That's it. I am now in the hands of the local Moukhabarat *(secret service). Before they leave me I offer my belt and US water bottle to the big Fedayeen. I noticed that he had been eyeing them as they hung on my rear-view mirror, and he probably needed them more than I did.*

The men are not hostile as they question me. One of them rises, a big man who is dressed casually in jeans and a shirt. Beneath a forehead vacant of hair, his green eyes sparkle with intelligence. In impeccable French he says: "My name is Aniss Salmen. I work in the Ministry of Information, and I am going to help you."

Boxed in by two other cars, we start on our way again. The small convoy stops near an enclosed grove of Eucalyptus tress. One man opens a gate and invites me to go into the woods, which I am not too happy to do. There, with my help, Aniss begins a complete search of my car. I explain to him that I work for Concord Publications, which explains the military aspect of some of the equipment. An intelligent man, Aniss understands. Next a less accommodating Moukhabarat *searches my vehicle.*

After Aniss disappears, I am left in the hands of several bad men. The leader, whose moustache makes him look like Groucho Marx with a tan, acts like a tough guy. It goes without saying that my US military cards, camouflaged clothing (which were folded deep within my bag), compass, and khaki T-shirt (purchased at a famous surplus store in Paris named

*U.S.M.C.) do not help my cause at all. I try to explain to them that all of this equipment helps me to infiltrate and possibly deceive the American troops. I spend some time washing my hands and face while they continue to search the car. Feeling somewhat refreshed, I say to them, "*Franci. Iraki. Satakey.*" ("France. Iraq. Friend."). I am, nevertheless, physically and emotionally exhausted.*

Aniss reappears looking excited.

"They wanted to put you in prison as a spy," he apologizes, "but I convinced them you are a very special journalist. Welcome to Iraq."

He tells me that in spite of the current conditions he will take me to restaurant and then put me up at a hotel.

"I'm sorry it is not a very famous one," he warns, "but you will be able to take a shower, which I believe you need. Tomorrow we will go to Baghdad."

I feel like hugging Aniss and kissing his hairless forehead. Tears come to my eyes. I am so tired. After twelve days of struggles, finally a little human kindness.

In the light of a kerosene lamp, we eat a delicious meal of shish kabob *in a restaurant in the center of town. The fresh water does me enormous good. The clientele wear uniforms, but most of the officers are smiling, an interesting contrast to the attitudes of the humorless MPs.*

Diwaniyah is on a war footing. The street smells of strong tea. An old man selling candy bars offers one to me. I told him to give it to the kids. It seems that Iraqi hospitality knows no limit. "Westerners" bomb his city and this poor man offers me the little that he has. As terrible a butcher as Saddam Hussein was, it is sad that the people of Iraq have to suffer the cruelties of war to rid the country of him.

I have a terrible headache from the heat I endured during my car troubles at noon, so I ask Aniss for an aspirin. He takes me to the hospital that once had been a beautiful, and very modern, establishment. Now the doctors make do as well as they can, but they are overwhelmed. With a weak smile, a young doctor gives me a pill. I am told that the American bombardment killed 35 people and wounded 60 more. The youngest was an 11-year-old boy who had lost a leg.

After the visit to the hospital, Aniss takes me to the hotel where I drink some tea with the guards. There are quite a lot of insects in the room so I prefer to sleep in my sleeping bag than to use the bed. But I do spend at least thirty minutes in a hot shower.

4 April

We leave Diwaniyah at 0900. I follow an old car that Aniss is driving. Accompanying me is a young Moukhabarat *dressed in a tracksuit. His name is Hmdam, but I decide to call him "Ramdam." He appears to be armed with a large automatic pistol slid under his belt, besides the Kalashnikov he is carrying. The Al Hillah road is the last one leading to Baghdad. To our left is the 3rd ID, which is heading for Karbala, and the Marines are on the highway. We must pass them before they close the circle around Baghdad.*

At Al Hillah, we take some tea. Aniss goes to learn the latest news and returns with a serious look on his face.

"Yves, it is very, very grave!" he tells me.

Nevertheless, we continue. As we approach Baghdad, the atmosphere grows heavy. The streets are empty. At the Al Iskandariyah (Alexandria) train station, MT-LBs and M-113s acquired during the war with Iran have been strafed on their transport cars. There is enough abandoned material on the road to equip a division at least. Not a single Iraqi soldier can be seen. Empty shell casings at the foot of a battery are the only indication that the guns have been fired. Farther away, in a palm plantation not far from a refinery, about ten 57mm bi-tubes sit useless, pointing toward the sky. A lone T-72 tank sits intact along the roadside.

When we arrive at Al Mahmudiyah, thirty kilometers from Baghdad, the populace is in an uproar. During the night, so I am told, American aircraft destroyed five T-72s that had been placed in the middle of the town. Apparently, exploding ammunition had injured two hundred civilians, many of them children. I am profoundly demoralized by this news. Aniss also seems shaken by the news.

"This is very grave. This is very grave," he says to me again.

Sometimes the reality of war is more effective than any propaganda.

The Americans close the iron circle before I can pass through by car. Aniss decides to return to Diwaniyah, but I cannot resign myself to do that. After I catch up to his old car, we stop near an abandoned 130mm gun. Seeing two A-10s hovering in the sky above, we decide it is best not to linger there!

"Aniss, I have to get to Baghdad," I say to my escort. "That is my job. You have to let me leave." I add, "I can report on the suffering and courage of your people. I understand that you do not take risks, that you have to protect your family. You are a good man, and the new Iraq will need people like you."

Aniss hesitates. You cannot erase over a period of a few days the marks of twenty years of a dictatorship. It must have been a real struggle of conscience for him, but he decides to release me. He wishes me good luck and puts me in Ramdam's care. Our two vehicles separate near the abandoned gun.

I will never forget Aniss Selman. Without him I would never have arrived at the doors to Baghdad.

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